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A Review of Religion, Politics, and Culture
December 3, 1999

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To the Editors

A photo wrongly read

I salute Christopher Young's October 22 cover. I've seen hundreds of pictures of Pope John Paul II, but this photo seems so intensely personal—as if the Holy Father is turning with a blessing for all us *Commonweal* readers.

EDWARD F. HAYES
Orlando, Fla.

From the editors: Sorry to disappoint you, but he said at the time that it was only for the staff.

Thanks, but no thanks

Eamon Duffy's review [October 22] of George Weigel's biography of John Paul II is something of a left-handed blessing, like your cover of the pope for the same issue. Duffy acknowledges that "Wojtyla is by any standards a titanic human being." Such personalities are simply too good to be true, and any good journalist will try to cut them down to size.

Duffy's main criticism is that "Weigel's lack of distance from his hero undermines his credibility as an apologist." All this means is that Duffy has not understood a key element of Weigel's biographical methodology: that is, John Paul II's insistence that he be "understood from the inside."

Here Wojtyla, the phenomenologist, is stating the key principle not only for understanding his true self and the substance of his humanistic philosophy, but also Vatican II's projection of Christ as God's solution to what it means to be a human being in the modern world. Weigel's methodology in this book can be a first step for us to discern this whole series of interlinked meanings.

(REV.) JOHN F. KOBLER, C.P.
Chicago, Ill.

No built-in bias

In his review [November 5] of John Cornwell's book *Hitler's Pope*, the Rev. John F. Morley makes a statement about myself which I feel obliged to correct. He writes that "Peter Gumpel, S.J., is the *postulator* for the beatification of Pius XII" and that "Gumpel's task...is to do all in his power to promote the cause," and that, in consequence, he is "biased."

The two statements are not true, and the conclusion drawn from them is not only false but objectively offensive. In fact I am not the *postulator*, but the *relator* of the cause of Pius XII; that is, by papal appointment the autonomous and independent judge of investigation, whose task is to examine in a completely impartial manner everything concerning this cause; to supervise the drafting of the "Position on Life and Heroic Virtues," which in due time will be presented to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and to make sure also that possible objections have been presented and treated in an objective and fair manner.

I am confident that if Father Morley had been aware of the essential difference between the offices of *postulator* and *relator*, he would have refrained from stating that I am "biased." Obviously, however, his unintentional but objectively serious mistake needs to be corrected.

To this I may add that I refuse to be put in the same category with John Cornwell, a rank amateur in the fields of history, law, and theology, and whose untruthful statements regarding his consultation of the archives of the Secretary of State have been publicly refuted by an official Vatican statement (*see, L'Osservatore Romano*, daily edition and weekly English edition, both dated October 13, 1999).

PETER GUMPEL, S.J.
Vatican City

Back to the roots

Thanks for publishing David Goldweber's fine article ["Home at Last: The Pilgrimage of Claude McKay," September 10]. The review wonderfully chronicled McKay's career and his journey to Catholicism.

It is difficult in a few short pages to reveal the complexity of the environment of the Catholic interracial Friendship House of the 1930s and '40s. Mr. Goldweber focused for a bit on Bishop Bernard Sheil, who would still be considered a social liberal today, and who played a key role in bringing Catherine de Hueck and her Friendship House to Chicago. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, absent in the review, defies description.

The movements of radical Catholic "founders" of the 1930s, Dorothy Day and Catherine de Hueck, are today considered "liberal" more by adoption than actual practice. These two—more properly "radical" Catholic women—drew around themselves very complex and varied networks of friendship and association. Their complexity addressed the complexity of the church and world around them, and did great

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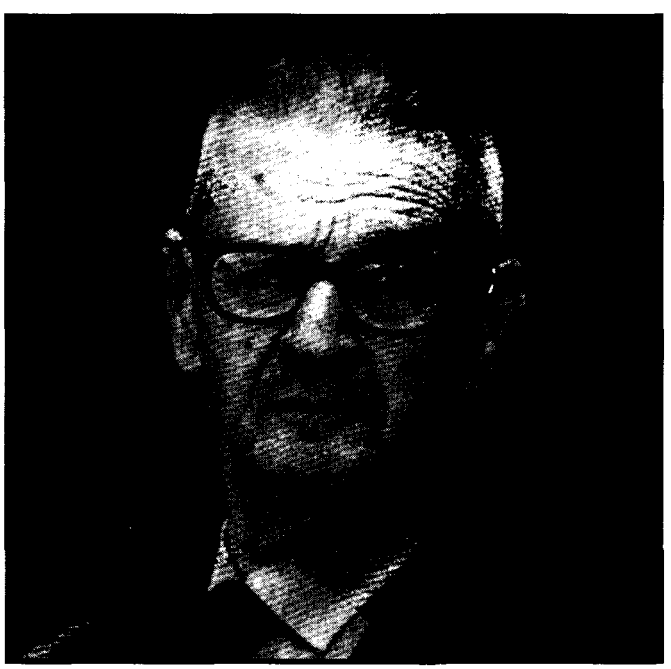

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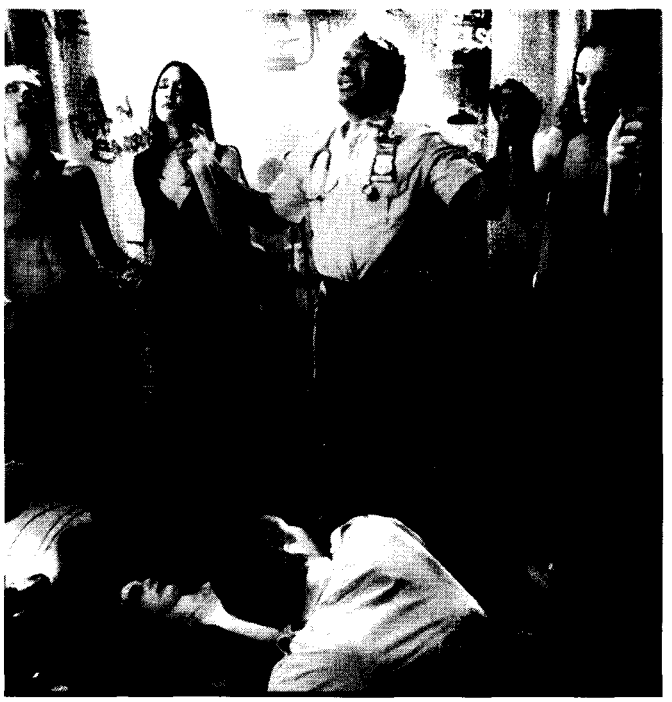

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CORRESPONDENCE

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things for persons seeking God and art and justice, like Claude McKay.

Current efforts to define liberal or neoconservative Catholicism tend to limit us to politicized "How we're better-than-Catholic" discussions. Probing the complex movements of radical Catholicism can humble us into continuing our search for becoming Catholic. I thank Mr. Goldweber for his enlightening contribution.

ALBERT SCHORSCH, III
Chicago, Ill.

The writer is president of the board of Friendship House.

Maurice & his friends

A. W. Godfrey's piece on Maurice Lavanoux ["Mr. Quilisma," September 10] shot me back into my childhood. I thought no one remembered that New York had a lively Catholic lay intelligentsia in the thirties and early forties. There was a network, if not quite a community, joining the liturgical movement, *Commonweal*, Friendship House, Corpus Christi Church, the Catholic Worker, *America*, and *Liturgical Arts*.

And the Quilisma! I remember those men in their overcoats and Homburgs. Though, as they admitted, there was not one good singer in the group, Dr. Becket Gibbs bullied them into a credible rendition of the chant; they sang a public Vespers (I think) once a year. And they talked, over their weekly spaghetti dinners, for hours.

Harry Binsse (an editor of *Commonweal*), Harold Rambusch of church decoration, Joseph Shanley, Ambrose Leonard, William O'Meara (the Duns Scotus scholar), and Barry Byrne, architect of contemporary churches, and my father, were among the Quilismites.

No curmudgeon to my parents, who referred to him as "Dear Maurice," nor to us children, Maurice Lavanoux got me my first teen-age summer job, adding those new zip codes to Sheed and Ward's mailing list.

Thanks for the time-travel moment.

ANN BYRNE
Providence, R.I.

On a par with C. S. Lewis

Thank you, thank you! for Anita Mathias ["I Was a Teen-age Atheist," October 8]. The world has not heard a turn of phrase like hers since C. S. Lewis's apologetics (as in "Paul, a bullet of hatred, galloping to Damascus to kill and destroy, he is struck off his horse and glimpses divinity").

Can we hear more from her? Bless her for showing the world (or at least our enclave of Christian intellectuals) that even deeply faithful Christians can shred language with their wit.

(REV.) MOLLY PHINNEY
Beverly, Mass.

Score one for Alleva

Richard Alleva's take on *The Sixth Sense* [September 24] is on the mark. With its ghost-like connections to everlasting love, the child as redeeming figure who suffers and loves, its deft use of the color red to move and deepen it, *The Sixth Sense* is memorable. Bruce Willis, by taking the more subtle approach in playing his role, demonstrated his willingness to "present" the superb acting of Haley Joel Osment. This was generous and a real contribution to film as art. ROSE PACATTE, F.S.P.
Boston, Mass.

The writer is director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Boston.

Score two for CMWL

In your issue of September 10, Lyn Burr Brignoli's "Broken Body to Broken Body" is extraordinary—the finest short piece about faith I have read in a long time.

Second, I read Annie Dillard's difficult and brilliant *For the Time Being*, and have had an awful time explaining to friends why I think it is a work of genius and not really a book at all, in a sense. Peggy Rosenthal's review ["A God's-Eye View"] is perfect.

BRIAN DOYLE
Portland, Oreg.

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Mandate from Rome

On November 17, after more than a decade of negotiations with the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities, and after repeated efforts to appease curial offices, the American Catholic bishops acquiesced in the Vatican view that formal "juridical" norms are essential for assuring the religious identity and mission of Catholic higher education. We are not sure which is more discouraging: what this decision portends for Catholic higher education or what it tells us about the bishops.

As to the first, we have emphatically agreed that the bishops, or rather the whole Catholic community, confront a very real problem of maintaining Catholic identity in the universities. But this so-called "juridical" approach promises only to add to that problem rather than provide a solution (*see*, "Keeping Catholic Colleges Catholic," *Commonweal*, April 9, 1999). The norms the bishops voted to implement include the requirements that Catholic theologians seek a mandate to teach from the local bishop; that college and university presidents must be Catholic and, on taking office, make a profession of faith approved by the Vatican; and that board members and faculty be committed Catholics "to the extent possible." None of these measures in and of themselves can succeed at maintaining Catholic identity, and their imposition will undermine those local efforts (some of them outlined by Peter Steinfels, Andrew Greeley, and Francis Nichols, in our April 9 issue) that are being pressed by faculty or administrators, often in the face of skeptical opposition. Heavy-handed measures can only strangle the delicate negotiations committed Catholics have brought to the discussions in their own departments and faculty senates. We do not underestimate the opposition within the academy to a clarification of Catholic identity. What seems obvious is that Rome's response will make matters worse, not better.

Many of the bishops, let it be said, are determined not to be heavy handed. Bishop John Leibrecht, chair of the committee that drafted this American application of the norms, insists that implementation will remain the responsibility of the university, which according to the bishops' document enjoys full institutional autonomy and freedom from external intervention in its governance. The episcopal role, he said, is one of persuasion and exhortation.

But what then is "juridical" about the bishops' position? How is it fundamentally different from the previous version approved three years ago (and rejected by the Vatican), which relied on dialogue and trust between bishops and educators to reinforce Catholic identity? And if it is not fundamentally different, why cause the ill will and suspicion that the last few years of revision have produced?

The truth is that enormous ambiguity surrounds the current document. A few bishops, furthermore, are inclined to be heavy handed; many others will be egged on by organized conservative lobbyists; and all will find grounds in the application for exactly the kind of confrontations and interventions that Leibrecht and other prelates forswear.

While visions of antimodernist censorship and self-censorship, of spies and snitches, may overplay the consequences of implementing the norms, they are not entirely fanciful either. In more instances, a cheerful Roman duplicity will take

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hold: Don't see, don't tell. Hypocrisy is a well-honed Catholic tool for dealing with inherently contradictory situations. In a few places, theological Zhdanovists will root out all but the catechism thumpers and yes-men (and women). But in most places, good people will try to make this work—to what effect only time will tell. Nonetheless, it will take only a handful of battles over academic freedom and university independence to poison the entire process. And at what cost to an intelligent and educated church! One can only hope that, having thrown themselves on their swords for a legal solution to a cultural and intellectual challenge, the bishops may be able, in their own dioceses, to bring about a careful and resourceful implementation without disturbing the programs and practices already in place to insure Catholic identity.

The bishops may have left their meeting with a sense of having, at last, taken decisive action in the prolonged haggling over *Ex corde ecclesiae*. But instead of decisive action, they wearily took verbal action. Instead of confronting these problems in their concrete complexity, the bishops took refuge in formulas that are immediately satisfying but evade, or even muddle, the hard questions. At their November meeting, the bishops ended a statement on another matter (Iraq) with the words of the psalmist, but they will do as well for their misbegotten application of norms on Catholic colleges and universities. "May God, in his mercy, rescue us all from the tangle in which we are snared."

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NOTEBOOK

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

The pope makes a house call

Religion and sex. It's a marriage made in heaven. I learned this while reading George Weigel's back-breaking, thousand-page biography of John Paul II (*Witness to Hope*), where Weigel celebrates the revolutionary nature of Karol Wojtyla's thinking about "sexual function and the mutual exchange of pleasure."

Let me explain.

For my sins, I spent the better part of a month plowing through *Witness to Hope*. It was not a light penance. Weigel not only chronicles the pope's every hiccup and Carpathian hike, but he is determined to provide an exegesis for nearly every papal utterance. In tackling John Paul's more opaque writings, Weigel usually enters the very wise *caveat* that, however profound his ideas may be, Wojtyla's philosophical prose "does not make for easy reading." Amen to that.

About a third of the way through the book, I started getting that sinking feeling I associate with the Donner party. This blizzard of words was not going to let up; I was not going to make it out alive. Imagine my delight, then, when Weigel turned to the ever-fraught subject of sex. Surely here was a topic to lift the sagging eyelids of any weary reviewer.

Periodically during my titanic struggle with *Witness to Hope* (which, by the way, has many fine things in it), my wife would pass through the room and cast a skeptical eye in my direction. "Are you still reading that?" she would protest, before announcing her estimate of the meager hourly wage I was getting as a reviewer. "I'm on to the sex part now," I said brightly. She rolled her eyes.

To coin a phrase, the pope's exacting Theology of the Body "does not make for easy reading." Or for easy understanding. But the arcane vocabulary—a mixture of Red Cross Blood Drive exhortation and organ transplantation pleas—can bring the occasional smile. I learned that the goal of sex within marriage is "perfect self-donation" and how "true attraction desire... the other's good through the gift of myself." A line, I confess, that I have on occasion used myself. But when I came upon Weigel's pithy summary of John Paul's theology of sex, I felt compelled to call my wife back into the room. Marriage, after all, is a "school where we become fitted...to make a complete gift of self to the other." I could not, in good conscience, spare her this.

"Darling," I said, my eyes alight in hopeful expectation, "would you say that our sex life 'is an icon of the interior life of God'?"

Honesty compels me to report that a moment of awkward silence followed. My wife then gave me what I can only describe as a pitying look.

"Just let me explain...," I protested.

She smiled patronizingly, patted me on the shoulder in the spirit of "mutual self-giving," and headed out of the room. "I don't understand how you can read that stuff," she said, shaking her head.

But what does she know? She's not even a Catholic!

I read on. There was so much "mutual self-donation" I had a hard time keeping track of who was donating what. There was also "conjugal dialogue," sexual love as "an act of worship," "The Law of the Gift," "the mutuality of self-giving, in a truly nuptial relationship expressed through their embodiness as

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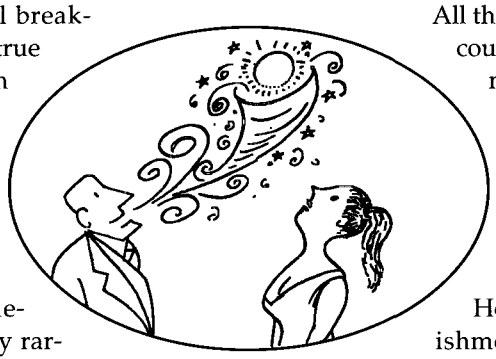
male and female." By the time I finished the section, I was eager to return to the more mundane tales of how John Paul toppled communism, saved the post-Vatican II church, rebuffed "radical" feminism, stanched the exodus from the priesthood, and in his spare time reconciled Catholicism to capitalism.

Weigel's stamina is humbling, and he labors heroically to turn the pope's firm opposition to contraception into a new humanistic and philosophical breakthrough in our understanding of the true meaning of sexuality. God knows, in this age of abortion and incipient eugenics, we desperately need another "story" about the place of sex in a fully human life. But the pope's highly abstract and mystical approach only trades in an older hopelessly rarefied and arguably more negative description of sex for another hopelessly rarefied and arguably more positive description. You can only rearrange the old prohibitions in so many ways.



I suspect that most married people will still come away from the pope's theology of the body scratching their heads—I suppose we should be scratching each other's heads—about how the use of contraception turns one's spouse into a sinful object of sexual self-gratification. However idealistic the framework, the old taboo still serves as ballast. Even translating John Paul's ruminations into "more accessible categories and vocabulary," as Weigel urges, is unlikely to change the reception of this very unpersuasive teaching. Weigel imagines that John Paul's work on sex is a "theological time bomb" set to go off to great and salutary effect some time in the next century. I suspect it's a dud. And I suspect we don't honor this remarkable pope by solemnly pretending otherwise.

All this brought back to memory my first encounter with the pope's writings on sexual morality. Many years ago I was asked by a newspaper to review Wojtyla's *Love and Responsibility*, together with his then recently published *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. I read it. I believe my words to the book editor were that it "does not make for easy reading." However, I vividly remember my astonishment and delight in coming across the book's detailed instruction on the moral imperative of *simultaneous* orgasm. In fact, I seem to remember excitedly reading that bit aloud to my wife. As I recall, she rolled her eyes and mumbled something about "another impossible Catholic sexual teaching."

"Honey," I began, "just let me explain."

PAUL BAUMANN

Paul Baumann is executive editor of Commonweal.

ETHICS WATCH

DANIEL CALLAHAN

GOOD STRATEGIES & BAD

Opposing physician-assisted suicide

The state of Oregon has been notable in recent years for some policy innovations, not all of which please people in other parts of the country. The two that are most striking are its Medicaid program and its law on physician-assisted suicide (PAS). Its Medicaid program, which prioritizes some 734 medical treatments, is dependent on its annual state budget to determine how far down the list it can go to provide those treatments. Attacked by many at the outset—a way of picking on the poor, it was said—the policy has worked exceedingly well, becoming a model for consideration by a number of countries (though, oddly, by no other states). But that program has faded from attention at the moment, overshadowed by Oregon's PAS law.

According to its supporters, Oregon's PAS legislation is no less successful, showing that a responsibly administered law can avoid the pitfalls and calamities its critics have predicted. Since only fifteen people officially availed themselves of the right of PAS in its first year, 1998, that claim does not mean much. More important will be the evolution of PAS as a practice in Oregon over a number of years, particularly when—and if—it loses public and media attention and the number of patients wanting to avail themselves to it increases, as is generally expected.

Earlier this fall, the House of Representatives passed Bill H.R. 2260, the "Pain Relief Act of 1999." Its purpose is two-fold: to thwart Oregon's attempt to allow physicians to use controlled substances, ordinarily opioids, to assist patients in committing suicide, and to advance palliative-care research and education. As someone who has spent fifteen years or so actively opposing euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, and working to advance palliative care, this is the kind of bill I wish I could like. I can't. It strikes me as flawed, unwise legislation that will do more harm than good in the struggle against PAS.

I am not happy to be saying this. I know that some groups, and many of my friends and other opponents of PAS, have worked hard to get the bill passed. But I have come to think that, if PAS (and euthanasia) are to be effectively combated over the long run, great care must be taken with the arguments used and the strategies chosen. The combination of the American love of self-determination, a rapid rise in the number of elderly, and the kind of long, drawn-out deaths that are the mark of the regnant chronic diseases, is likely to make PAS ever more attractive as time goes on.

Right now, with the exception of Ore-

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gon, the struggle against PAS is being won. Other bills in state legislatures do not even make it out of committee, and no other state seems on the verge of following Oregon. In short, opposition to PAS seems to be prevailing nationally. All the more reason to be careful in choosing how to press the case against it.

There are two popular but mistaken arguments against PAS, one drawn upon by the Left, the other by the Right. Liberal opponents of PAS, of which there are many, believe the strongest case against it is the danger it poses to the poor and the weak, those unable to defend themselves from coercion and social rejection. Surely abuse could happen, but it is far more likely that it is members of the educated middle and upper classes who are most at risk. They are the ones who think control of one's body is the greatest value in life, and that dependence and bodily decay are a threat to their dignity. But the greatest danger of PAS is the social legitimation of suicide as a way of dealing with the suffering and sorrows of life. That most of the first cases of PAS in Oregon came from people who feared a loss of control, not pain and suffering—similar to the pattern in Holland—lends some credibility to my hypothesis.

The argument from the Right is that, somehow, an embrace of PAS is a way of forsaking the innate worth and dignity of terminally ill patients who only need improved pain control. It is said that PAS is a societal way of singling out such patients to deny them the dignity and value of their lives by setting aside their legitimate needs. But this is a scarcely credible interpretation of what is going on, since the purpose of the Oregon law is to allow patients to choose PAS. Society will not force them to choose PAS. They will choose it themselves. Again, the first Oregon cases in 1998 showed that some people rejected palliative care altogether, while others started it but then stopped. If any dignity was being taken from them, they were the ones doing the taking.

As for the strategies to be used in opposing any extension of the Oregon law to other states, and for showing the faults of that law as it is written, I offer two thoughts. First, the Oregon law is a badly written law, subject to no meaningful public oversight, and open to serious abuse (by allowing people to shop around for permissive physicians, and by shielding physicians from careful scrutiny in their decisions). But what if it "works," that is, what if few abuses are actually uncovered or simply don't exist to any meaningful degree? Because that is possible, a strategy dependent upon the existence of abuses to condemn the practice is a bad gamble. It is surely useful to watch out for them, but it is far better to argue that the practice is intrinsically wrong, by virtue of its legitimation of suicide, and by its perversion of long-standing, well-grounded medical traditions. Doctors simply should never be given that kind of power.

Second, while I am not much swayed by the argument from states' rights, I am enough of an Aristotelian to think prudence is always important in debates of this kind. In this case, the voters of Oregon in 1994 exercised their legal right to use the ballot initiative to approve PAS. But in 1997, opponents tried to get the legislature to overturn that vote, occasioning much indignation at what was clearly an attempted end run. That effort failed and those who sought to overturn the 1994 vote lost by an even greater margin, 60 percent to 40 percent. Prudence would dictate not attempting, once again, what looks like an underhanded tactic to nullify the Oregon law. That tactic is a poor way to advance opposition to PAS.

Yet if the House bill does not win support in the Senate and ultimately fails, will that not set back the important palliative-care initiative the bill undertakes to promote? Not necessarily, for other bills to that end are possible and have been proposed. Moreover, there is nothing in the present federal drug enforcement rules to preclude the use of controlled substances to relieve pain, even at the risk of death. In 1990, the Drug Enforcement Administration explicitly affirmed the right to use narcotic analgesics to treat pain, knowing full well, as do all doctors, that there is always a risk of death in doing so. The House bill is not likely to do much in relieving physician worries, most of which do not have a basis solely in legal worries. It is as much their fear of accidentally killing someone by their pain relief as it is a fear of the law that hampers many physicians in their use of palliative care. There is no legal remedy for that problem—rooted in their education and common practice—only better education and a long process of changing medical mores. □

OF SEVERAL MINDS

JO McGOWAN

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

U.S. college students in India

There is nothing like meeting a college student for getting a sense of popular culture. My husband and I, who live in northern India, have just taken on a project in collaboration with a university in the United States that sends students to India. Our job is to organize a nine-week, academic, classroom-based course, interspersed with field trips and cultural events, which culminates in a four-week field placement in a development organization. For us, it has been fascinating to see how U.S. students view education and to discover some of our own biases.

One of our first surprises was that the students view their professors as equal partners. While most of them are willing to concede that the teacher may have more information on the subject at hand, this confers no special status, nor does it render his opinions any more valuable than their own.

This conflicts sharply with the Indian view. Here the teacher is the repository

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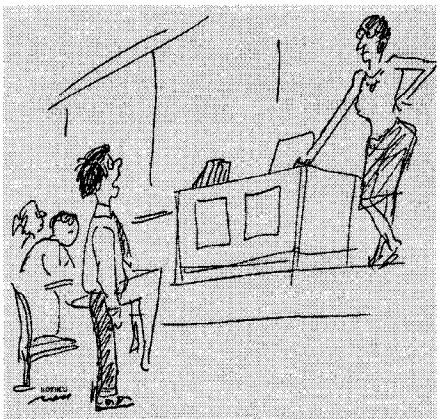
of all wisdom and the student is simply meant to receive. An American living in India, I have been highly critical of this view, especially as my own children have moved through the school system. They are often bored to the point of tears as the teacher drones on, never challenged or questioned. One of the inevitable side effects of such a system is a generation of students unable to think for themselves.

Confronted with the opposite approach of the U.S. students, however, I now find myself more sympathetic to a system of education that demands a person know something before he speaks. The visiting American students, when presented with the lectures our professors think necessary—given the students' near total unfamiliarity with Indian history, geography, politics, culture, and religion—complain of mind-numbing boredom and even, to quote one of them, "oppression." But when the subjects are opened for discussion, the students' comments betray an almost blissful ignorance and superficiality.

This is not surprising: They really know next to nothing about the material. What is surprising is their continued insistence that they are well-informed. The problem goes beyond typical undergraduate arrogance and seems to reflect a common situation in U.S. society today, where the sheer wealth of media-generated material on every conceivable subject makes most people believe they are reasonably well-informed about a wide variety of issues. After they've read a few copies of *Time* or *Newsweek* and sat through a newsmagazine-type television program or two, a whole range of topics—the situation in Kosovo, the fighting in Kashmir, genetic engineering, euthanasia, and the latest breakthrough in computer technology—are all checked off the list and considered understood.

Here in India, educated people are often amused by the efforts of uneducated people to use terms they clearly do not understand. Any intravenous drip, for example, is invariably referred to as "glucose." Electricity is known generically as "light." What seems to amuse those in the know is the way



"Miss Jones, my father said, 'Only the ignorant know everything'!"

people latch on to the terms, confusing the part for the whole.

It is, however, something we all do, all the time, but in such an intelligent, articulate way as to fool both ourselves and most of the people we meet. Occasionally we encounter a real expert in a subject on which we are holding forth and the result can be ludicrous. (In my rabid antinuke days, when I based my arguments mainly on moral indignation, I was once picked up while hitchhiking by a man who turned out to be a nuclear physicist. He let me go on at great length about the dangers of radiation and the half-life of nuclear waste material—I quoted from half-understood leaflets with what I thought was brilliant effect—before finally revealing himself.)

The value of studying in a foreign country (particularly one as foreign as India) may lie chiefly in the experience of being totally without reference points, of being compelled to see things as if for the first time, and to come to conclusions based not on the past but on the immediate present. This is the dream that most of our students come to India holding, and they are convinced that the conclusions they come to, based purely on their own extremely limited experiences here, will somehow be both wise and correct. This might be possible if they were older, and would be even more likely if they were solidly grounded in their own disciplines. That they do not seem to be, in spite of having excellent grades, is an interesting comment on the present system of education in the United States. But I do not blame the students. The problem goes way back, perhaps to the way they were treated as children.

One of the big differences in the Indian style of child rearing and the American is that in India the child is given very little control, or even pretense of control. Unconditional love, yes, and the assurance that all her needs will be met (as far as possible), whether this is convenient for the parents or not. But her opinion is never requested, and she is expected to mind her own business and not interfere in adult affairs. This does not seem to be the case in the United States where children are given enormous importance and respect, where they are deferred to and often asked to contribute to family decision making.

The problem with this approach is the importance given to cognitive development at a time when the cognitive is relatively unimportant. Small children require emotional security first. They need to know that their parents are always there for them, managing their lives and taking care of business so that they can get on with being kids. Instead, in the United States they are solemnly consulted about where the family should go on vacation and required to negotiate with their parents as to the size of their allowance and the time they must go to bed.

I have done this sort of stuff with my own children and it has been a source of amazement to my Indian husband. "Why are you asking them?" he asks incredulously. I have always felt more enlightened than he in my respect for them as individuals. But now, seeing the results in the form of these U.S. university students, I am beginning to wonder if I haven't burdened my children with decisions they have neither the competence nor the need to make. Will they, like the students, end up believing they are perfectly equipped to give their opinion on whatever subject, simply because they have one? Will they go through life believing that every individual's opinion is as valuable as the next person's, regardless of experience, knowledge, wisdom, or spiritual depth? I shudder at the idea. □

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A MOST UNLIKELY HERO

A Fascist who saved Jews

Gregory Conti

December 1944. A bitter cold day in Budapest. A tall handsome man in a dignified but tattered suit, his eyes alert and searching, is peering down the loading dock as long lines of men, women, and children are being pushed toward waiting freight cars by German soldiers and Hungarian police. Behind the man is a black Buick sedan with a Spanish flag flying from its aerial.

Suddenly the man rushes forward, grabs two young boys by the collar, drags them back down the platform, and throws them into the back seat of his car. A German soldier runs over and pulls his revolver, gesturing to the man to put the boys back in line. The man refuses. "This car is foreign territory," he shouts at the soldier. "The boys are under Spanish jurisdiction and you'll be violating international law if you so much as touch them." The two men begin to scuffle and a German lieutenant colonel comes over to investigate. He tells the soldier to leave the man and the boys alone. "Go ahead and take them," he says to the man, barely glancing toward the back seat of the car. "Their time will come."

Just a few steps away, another man stands in front of a car bearing a Swedish flag. He is Raoul Wallenberg, sent to Budapest by the king of Sweden on a mission to buy safe passage out of Hungary for as many Jews as possible. After the scuffle, Wallenberg walks over and, with mixed concern and irritation, says to the Spaniard, "You realize who that was, don't you?"

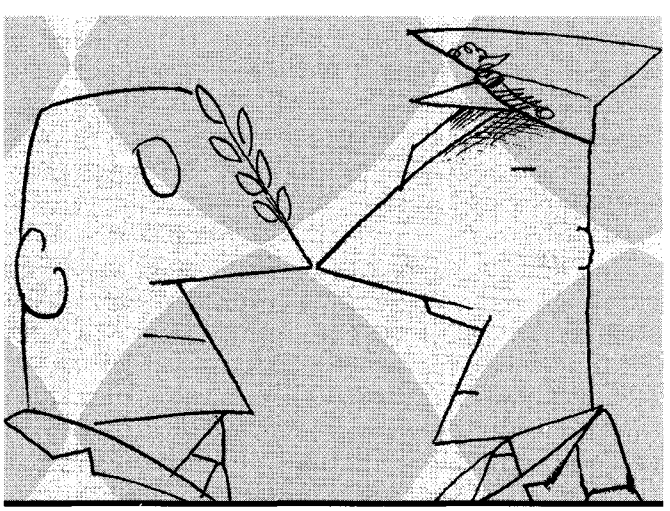
"No, who was it?"

"That was Adolf Eichmann."

Wallenberg thought he was speaking to Jorge Perlasca, the Spanish consul in Budapest. But in fact, the man who had pulled the two boys out of line was not Jorge but Giorgio Perlasca; not Spanish but Italian; and not a diplomat but a buyer for an Italian livestock importing company, recently escaped from a German internment camp. Perlasca had named himself Spanish consul, without any authorization whatsoever, on December 1, 1944, when the real Spanish ambassador fled to Switzerland. For the next two months, Perlasca would be in charge of the embassy, and his management of Spain's protection program for Hungarian Jews would save some five thousand of them from certain death in the gas chambers.

In many ways, Giorgio Perlasca was an unlikely candidate for heroism in the Holocaust. A dedicated Fascist, he fought for Mussolini during Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and again in the Spanish Civil War in support of Francisco Franco. He dissented a bit too vocally, however, from the Fascist anti-Jewish racial laws of 1938, and when the war with the Allies broke out, he was given an exemption from military service. In September 1943, when Italy signed its separate peace with the Allies, Perlasca was in Hungary, where he was promptly arrested by the German SS and sent to an internment camp. He escaped, found his way to the Spanish embassy, and, in recognition for his service to Franco, was given Spanish citizenship and a passport. Unable to get back to Italy, Perlasca signed on as a volunteer in the Spanish effort to protect Hungarian Jews and, when Spanish ambassador Angel Sanz-Briz fled to Switzerland, Perlasca announced that he was the new Spanish consul.

Perlasca's diary of his two-month consulship, contained in Enrico Deaglio's *The Banality of Goodness* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), recounts the extraordinary exploits of Perlasca and a small group of collaborators on the embassy staff: churning out thousands of false documents, setting up and defending eight "safe houses" under Spanish jurisdiction, finding food and medicine on the black market, negotiating with the Hungarian authorities, and, together with Wallenberg and representatives of other neutral countries (Portugal, Switzerland, and the Vatican), pulling innocent



Gregory Conti *is an English teacher at the University of Perugia and the Foreign Language School of the Italian army, and the translator of* The Banality of Goodness.

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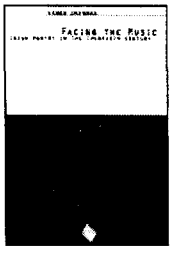

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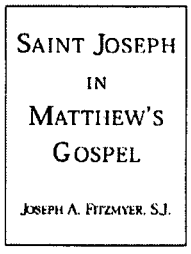

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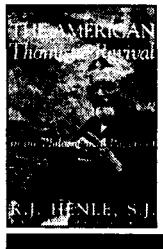

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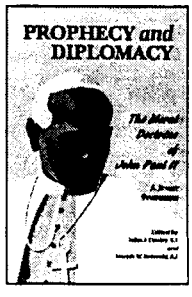

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victims from freight cars bound for the death camps. Through it all, Perlasca showed himself to be an ingenious organizer, a convincing "diplomat,"and a truly magnificent impostor.

At war's end came the long trip home and more than forty years of silence—until 1987, when he was discovered by a group of Hungarian Jewish women (young girls in 1944) who owed their lives to him. Perlasca was then a seventy-seven-year-old man living a modest life in Padua. In 1989, the first time Deaglio went to visit the rescuer at his home, Perlasca didn't even have a telephone:

> To communicate with him you had to go through his sister, who lived next door. When someone called for Giorgio, his sister would hang a newspaper out on the terrace with a clothespin, so when Giorgio went out for a walk he could look up and see the signal. Then he would ring the doorbell and his sister would come out on the terrace and yell down to him that someone had called. It wasn't long, however, before so many people were calling that this makeshift system was no longer able to handle the phone traffic. Over the next four years, Perlasca would be decorated with honors by Israel, Hungary, Spain, the United States, and, finally...by Italy as well.

When Perlasca was asked what episode he remembered most, he always cited "the case of the twin boys" he had snatched from Eichmann. "I took them over to one of our safe houses and, once we were there, I realized that they weren't two boys after all. They were brother and sister. They had those little differences that begin in the development phase; the boy a little bit of hair on his upper lip and the girl just the first signs of breasts. We kept them for a few days and then we handed them over to the Red Cross. I never saw them again. I don't know what finally became of them, although I think they made it. But I'll always remember when I saw them walking forward together in that line. I think I'll remember them rather than so many others because they were so strikingly alike, because they were alone, and because they were so beautiful."

Giorgio Perlasca died of a sudden heart attack at his home in Padua, on August 15, 1992, just before publication of the fourth Italian edition of the Deaglio book.

Perlasca's dramatic contribution to the rescue effort raises a number of compelling questions. The most obvious, of course, is why did he do it? "Because I couldn't stand the sight of people being branded like animals," he told Deaglio. "Because I couldn't stand seeing children being killed. That's what I think it was. I don't think I was a hero."

Perlasca's answer may seem deceptively simple. After all, at one time he had been a committed Fascist. Further illumination on his choice comes from his response to another question: Why did he break with the Fascist party over the 1938 racial laws? "I couldn't understand the discrimination against the Jews. So many of my friends were Jews, in Fiume, Trieste, and Como. In Spain, the commander of a battery in my artillery regiment was a Jew from Rome...." Unlike Hitler's "willing executioners," Perlasca retained the ability to think for himself, to respond not only to the dictates of ideology but to the evidence of his personal experience and his own perception of reality. Like others among the minority of his fellow Italian Christians who helped both Italian and foreign Jews, Perlasca shared what Susan Zuccotti has called an "amiable inclination to ignore the rules" and a "traditional peasant contempt for the authorities. In the face of an obviously contrasting reality, no one could tell them that...Jews were their enemy" (*The Italians and the Holocaust*, University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

The tendency of ideology to obscure reality is also part of the answer to another question asked by Dr. Eveline Blitstein Willinger, the woman who led efforts in 1987 to find Perlasca and to have him recognized for what he had done. "How is it possible," she inquired, "that a person like that is living somewhere in Italy and nobody has ever even heard his name?" Part of the postwar silence about Perlasca stemmed from a general desire to forget the Holocaust and the war. Another reason was the guilt of individuals involved in recognizing their own failure to act.

One more factor, however, was the ideological polarization of postwar Italian politics. In a country whose new constitution defined it as an "anti-Fascist"republic, it was not likely that a Fascist like Perlasca would be recognized as a hero. Compare Perlasca's treatment with that afforded his colleague in Budapest, Raoul Wallenberg. The Swedish envoy disappeared immediately following the entry of Soviet troops into Budapest, and his disappearance was later used as a means of attacking the Soviet Union. The recognition Wallenberg received for his work in Budapest was due in part to its usefulness as a weapon in the cold war. Perlasca, the Fascist who had returned safely to Italy, could not be used in the same way.

Rain All Night

On the road home the tide is rising.

Riding the road-tide is dangerous
but it's not safe to stand still.
Hang on the verge & you drown.

I'm going along for the ride.
I may see more riders further on.
Drowning must wait till I get there
and who knows who might be waiting
with a flash-light, a thermos,
even a raft or a canoe.

Marie Ponsot

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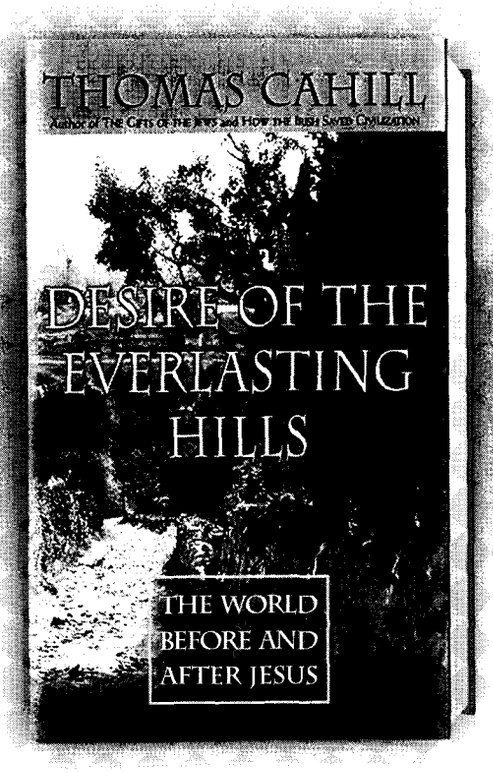
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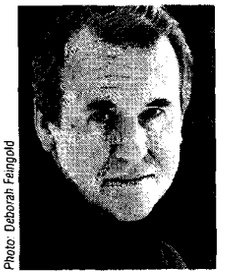

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Thomas Cahill, author of the national bestsellers *How the Irish Saved Civilization* and *The Gifts of the Jews*, now continues his Hinges of History series with a tantalizing focus on the ancient world before and after Jesus. His fresh and provocative interpretation of the New Testament is sure to delight readers and even surprise biblical scholars. But it is his brilliant portrait of Jesus as a real person—sharp-witted and sharp-tongued but also kind, humorous, and affectionate—that makes this book essential reading for anyone seeking a richer understanding of events that changed the course of human history.

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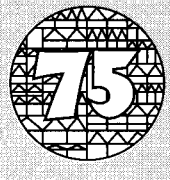
The most extraordinary aspect of Perlasca's rescue operation, however, is not why he did it but how. As Deaglio points out, there were a lot of Italians who helped Jews or delayed or deflected the course of events by refusing to commit brutalities, or merely by hiding a file or making a phone call to warn intended victims. But what Perlasca accomplished is unique and astounding. He didn't have a role, it must be remembered; he created it himself. Nor was his virtuous action exhausted in a single gesture. During the nearly two months Perlasca directed the Spanish embassy, he was engaged in an enormous act of make-believe. In creating the identity of "Jorge," Perlasca succeeded in fooling not only the Hungarian authorities but also his colleagues at the other neutral embassies. They all believed that he was someone he was not: an official functionary and diplomatic representative, with duties for which he had neither professional training nor experience. To be sure, Perlasca had some attributes for the role that not everyone has—good looks, an imposing physical stature, and, thanks to his service in Spain, a good command of Spanish—but it was his imaginative capacity to draw upon those resources in playing the role of Jorge that made him so convincing.

Perlasca's own account of the events (presented in chapter 6 of Deaglio's book) has the narrative intensity of a thriller whose protagonist is completely caught up in a challenge that demands every resource he can muster. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that Perlasca's theatrical imagination was in fact the key to his success. First, his new identity enabled him to distance himself from the horror, from the scenes of cruelty and brutality that, witnessed and lived first hand, might have been so overwhelming as to be paralyzing. And second, theatrical distance enhanced his ability to see and understand the motivations of his Hungarian counterparts, and to develop and carry out a diplomatic strategy that responded to their needs and fears. While holding out the promise of Spanish recognition and assistance in the event of an Allied victory, Perlasca threatened the Hungarian authorities with retaliation against Hungarian citizens in Spain, should their government go forward with its plans to exterminate the Jews. Both the promise and the threat, of course, were complete fabrications, since Perlasca never had any communication with his "superiors" in Madrid. But the strategy succeeded in delaying the Final Solution in Hungary until the Soviet army occupied Budapest and put an end to the deportations.

Enrico Deaglio concludes his book by paraphrasing Hannah Arendt in describing Perlasca as "proof that, even in the most impenetrable darkness, there exists—because it is part of the human spirit—the temptation of the irreducible, fabulous, word-and-thought-defying 'banality of goodness.'" Perlasca's story also reminds us, however, that the expression of human goodness in the struggle against human evil is an enterprise whose success requires not only courage and perseverance but also skill, craft, art, and imagination. □

From the archives



Throughout 1999, Commonweal *has been celebrating its 75th anniversary. Here from the magazine's November 20, 1964 issue is an excerpt from "Birth Control and the Council" by theologian Gregory Baum.*

We must ask the question: Is the church's infallibility involved in her teaching on family morality? The answer is NO. Here are the reasons:

1. The church receives the assistance of the Spirit to teach infallibly the saving revelation of God, that is, faith and morals which Jesus has announced to us. The church also teaches with infallibility in matters which are essential to the defense of the gospel in the world. But her teachings regarding natural wisdom and the meaning and content of the natural law, however true they may be, and however authoritative her voice in proclaiming them, are not and can never be infallible. There are areas where the church teaches with authority without claiming to speak infallibly.

2. The present position on family morality belongs to the ordinary teaching of the Holy See. Since the nineteenth century, this teaching authority, though by no means claiming infallibility, has obliged Catholics, the bishops and the faithful, to be obedient to it, that is to cease reflecting on, studying, discussing matters thus proposed. They are to be regarded as settled. The reason why...[is] because one position, namely that of the Holy See, was made obligatory.

The doctrine of collegiality which has emerged at the council means, among other things, that in teaching there is also a sharing, a discussion, a common search among the bishops; and even if the ordinary teaching of the Holy See retains a particular authority, it never precludes the contribution which the bishops all over the world want to make to these issues.

GREGORY BAUM

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I have been young and now am old.

Ps 37:25

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Richard Alleva

CHEAP GRACE

Scorsese's 'Bringing Out the Dead'

Here is a sequence from *Bringing Out the Dead* that occurs a third of the way through the film. It epitomizes what's right and what's wrong with Martin Scorsese's latest movie.

A couple of paramedics, Frank (Nicolas Cage) and Marcus (Ving Rhames) rush into an abandoned building to help a Hispanic woman give birth. But it's impossible that Maria is pregnant, the young man with her insists, she's a virgin, we haven't had sex together, we've been companions three years but we're both virgins!

Twins are born, one male and alive, the other female and dead. We're not told if the surviving infant is to be called Jesus but his identity isn't the point of the scene. What matters is that the self-torturing Frank, who's failed to rescue anyone for the past few weeks, delivers the dead baby, while Marcus, a jubilant, lecherous, God-fearing madman-saint who believes that saving lives is the greatest high imaginable, has once again scored a goal against death. Later, in the ambulance, Frank warns Marcus to get that smug look off his face, but the expression actor Rhames wears deserves a nobler word than "smug": His is the face of a wise baby who's just been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, Literature, and Having a Dry Diaper. It's a blissful moment for one man and a torture of sweet envy for the other, and the combative rapport between dour Frank and Rabelaisian Marcus is one of the best things in this movie, psychologically true and ferociously comic.

But suppose the Hispanics had simply been a married couple, unwilling to apply for medical help for fear of revealing their illegal immigrant status. Suppose there had been no claim of virgin birth (which, as played, arouses no suspicion of insanity or religious fanaticism), and suppose the mother's name had been Carmen or Irma instead of Maria. Would that have changed the scene and its crucial point—that Frank's jinx continues while Marcus is on a roll? Not at all. What's good in the scene is grounded in the realistic observation of the ways men interact under pressure. The hokey symbolism of the virgin birth is strictly an excrescence.

When *Bringing Out* is going well, it works as a fine war movie works, as the funnier segments of *The Big Red One* or *Saving Private Ryan* worked, with pity rubbing elbows with anger, both emotions overarched by a kind of loving despair for the human condition. For, in a way, the paramedics—tormented Frank, jiving Marcus, middling Larry, psychotic Tom—are soldiers: Their war zone is New York City in the early nineties and their weapons are tubes, pumps, syringes, drugs, and defibrillators. The enemy? The enemy is the people they are trying to save—drug addicts overdosing, madmen holding broken bottles to their own jugulars, runaway kids dropping dead in the streets. This is familiar Scorsese territory: the neighborhoods of New York as the purlieus of hell.

But, alas, someone (if only his evil angel) has whispered into the director's ear, "You are the great Magic Realist of cinema, the Gabriel García Márquez of New York, the Italo Calvino of Hollywood, and the most tortured Roman Catholic sensibility in the history of cinema (Shove over, Robert Bresson!)." And the powerful visual rhetoric that (in *Taxi Driver, Raging Bull, King of Comedy*) was always anchored and certified by realism, is here preposterously inflated and vulgarized.

Thus, we get not only the virgin-birth gambit, but countless shots of prostitutes and drug addicts walking along sidewalks bathed in ghastly green and red light while Frank stares at them lugubriously from the window of his ambulance. Unnecessary, since one shot of a very pregnant prostitute's stomach bulging under her skin-tight slacks early in the film tells all we need to know of the squalor of street life, but Scorsese can't help nudging us—see, see! urban hell! Frank is guilt-stricken for failing to save a runaway girl called Rose from a fatal seizure, and so he (and we) keep spotting her visage superimposed on the faces of passers-by, a startling device the first and even the second and third time Scorsese uses it, but the director doesn't know when to stop, so that by the time he shows a whole crowd of people wearing Rose's face, the effect has become tiresome, even ludicrous. By the time Frank walks around in a waking dream pulling various lost souls out of manholes and other crevices in the asphalt, I was ready to shout at the screen, "Okay,

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okay, I get it, *maestro*! New York is the Inferno and you are the Dante of Rock 'n' Roll!" In fact, critics have been granting Scorsese titles like that ever since steam oozed out of manholes at the start of *Taxi Driver*, but things have reached a pretty pass when great filmmakers start believing their admirers.

Directors, like writers, ratchet up the rhetoric when their material is slight, and, for all its Dantesque brooding, *Bringing Out* lacks a substantial story. I assume that the novel on which Paul Schrader's script is based deals with the day-to-day difficulties of a paramedic's life and that we get to know the protagonist well just by observing him on the job. But though the mechanics of his work are fascinating to watch on screen (maneuvering equipment up narrow flights of steps, defibbing victims, etc.), they don't, by themselves, give us access to the narrator's character. That's why Schrader has written internal monologues for Cage to recite, but they are dreadful, full of observations like, "The god of hellfire is not a role anyone wants to play," that manage to be simultaneously fruity and meaningless. A guilt complex has been invented for our hero, but we are never told what it is in the hero's past that makes him susceptible to guilt. (Well, he has had a Catholic education, but I've known Catholic schoolboys so free from guilt as to be downright sociopathic.) His love affair with a patient's daughter might have shed some light, but the conversations between the lovers are vapid and there's no chemistry between Nicolas Cage and Patricia Arquette: Their baleful stares cancel each other out and both their voices lapse into soulful monotones.

Some reviewers have opined that Frank is too much the pure observer to be interesting, but I don't agree. He rescues his sweetheart from a den of vice, singlehandedly saves two others from hideous deaths, then takes it upon himself to euthanize the heroine's father. There's nothing exactly inactive about Frank, there's just not enough going on beneath the activity. He's the Knight from Nowhere. (Possible defense: The action is allegorical; Frank is Everyman and therefore doesn't need psychology. To which I would respond: Allegorical heroes need allegorical landscapes, like the ones Bunyan's and Dante's heroes walk through. *Bringing Out* takes place in New York City nine years ago and any hero in such a specific locale must himself be defined with specifics before he can be invested with larger, abstract significance.)

Just as Wagner was able to perpetrate a *Parsifal* by playing fast and loose with Christian concepts, Scorsese has here made a pseudo-Catholic movie by playing fast and loose with Dantean imagery. The giveaway comes at the film's climax.

The heroine's father is under observation at the hospital for which Cage works. At first considered "plant food" because of the destruction of brain cells, the man now shows signs of mental as well as physical recovery. (*Nota bene*: The very last words the ER doctor speaks to Cage before the mercy killing are hopeful.) But Cage reads the old man's mind and the telepathic message is, Let me go! Pull the plug! And this is what Cage does. Is Scorsese portraying this as the act of a self-deceiving monomaniac? As the pitiable folly of a mentally and physically exhausted paramedic? Catholic reviewers and film teachers, embracing this movie as the latest instance of Monsignor Scorsese's deeply Christian artistry, will excuse that last act of euthanasia as irony or as compassionate realism (see, Scorsese is just showing what a man such as Frank would have done under the circumstances, but he's not endorsing it). But then they're going to have to explain away the bright, refulgent light in which Frank and his sweetheart sit and doze during the movie's final shot. Is that celestial-looking light a nimbus of irony? I think it's the director's blessing on his hero for having done the right thing.

Much of this film—the grim humor, the razor-sharp editing, most of the acting (especially by Tom Sizemore, Ving Rhames, and Clipp Curtis)—is exhilarating, but the Catholic elements are utterly bogus. As one papist regarding another, I hope that Scorsese comes to terms with his religion and finds peace within it. But as a critic judging the work of the man I still regard as the greatest American filmmaker, I wish Scorsese would become a Unitarian. □

MEDIA

Celia Wren

THE INSIDE DOPE(S)

NBC's 'The West Wing'

Nothing thrills like falling in with the in-crowd, and you can't get much further in—politically, at least—than NBC's new White House drama, "The West Wing." Set at the heart of a fictional Democratic administration, the show appeals to the same human instinct that packs the parking lot at Graceland, or that made a best seller of the *Starr Report*—the urge to peer behind the scenes of an exclusive world.

The world, in this case, belongs to President Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen) and his harried but wisecracking staff, including Rob Lowe as a brash young speechwriter and Allison Janney as a gimlet-eyed press secretary. Though stray ends of the characters' personal life do straggle into the picture—the vice-president runs a top-secret AA group disguised as a card game, for example—the show devotes itself principally to surfing political crises both great (the Syrians shoot down a plane) and small (Bartlet rides his bike into a tree). Always the aim is not to tell what happens, but to reveal how it happens—how threats and subtle blackmail win reluctant congressmen to support a gun-restriction bill, for example.

In delivering the how, not surprisingly, "West Wing's" creators count on a certain amount of viewer cynicism. Bart-

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let's minions obsess about spin and dole out political favors. "Every group has plenty of demons," a Moral Majority kingmaker complains during a stroll on the Washington Mall, when senior staffer Leo (John Spencer) tries to strong-arm him into quelling a right-wing protest. "You don't need to tell me that, Reverend," the world-weary White House official barks, "I'm a member of the Democratic party." Quips like this flatter us by implying that we are in the know—that we are sophisticated skeptics, well-versed in Beltway shenanigans.

At other moments, though, the series lobs an astonishing amount of misty-eyed idealism at us, starting with its unashamedly patriotic credit sequence, which features poignantly faded U.S. flags and a stirring drum beat. Bartlet, we are constantly reminded, is just a regular guy—he loses his eyeglasses and, when in a good mood, cooks chili (badly) for his staff. But many episodes conclude with the president's breaking into an inspiring speech that turns him into a wise father figure, protector of his employees and of the nation. These optimistic finales act as a kind of benediction, releasing us from the burdens of knowingness, from lingering anxieties that might make us think about the real world—and might disincline us to switch on the TV next time around.

After all, although "West Wing" may occasionally grant viewers the exhilaration of knowingness, its real lure is of a different kind—Washington shop talk, White House trade secrets (plausible, if fictional), glimpses backstage. Instead of a presidential speech, the program delivers the quips of the speechwriters as they eat Chinese take-out; instead of sound bites from the president's press conference, we get the rehearsal for the press conference, temper tantrums included.

Even the camera work conspires in the simulacrum of privileged access—a typical sweeping, seamless shot will reel down a corridor, following a heated conversation, until the characters enter a busy office complex, whereupon the camera will whirl around to show us secretaries answering phones, staffers pacing with clipboards, people shouting from doorways, and so on, until we feel that the space really surrounds us. Anyone who ever longed to be part of a high-school clique, or belonged to one, knows how enticing exclusivity can be: "West Wing" gives us the illusion of fraternizing with the elect on their own turf.

Conjuring up this kind of exclusive world is one of popular culture's best-tested ploys. The blockbuster mysteries of Patricia Cornwell, for example, rely largely on the mystique of an inner sanctum—the morgue. As her hard-edged heroine Dr. Kay Scarpetta, a medical examiner, investigates suspicious shootings, garrotings, mutilations, plague deaths, and other carnage, the novels glory in autopsy jargon and how-to. Take, for example, a passage from the recent *Point of Origin*, in which Scarpetta studies a badly burned corpse:

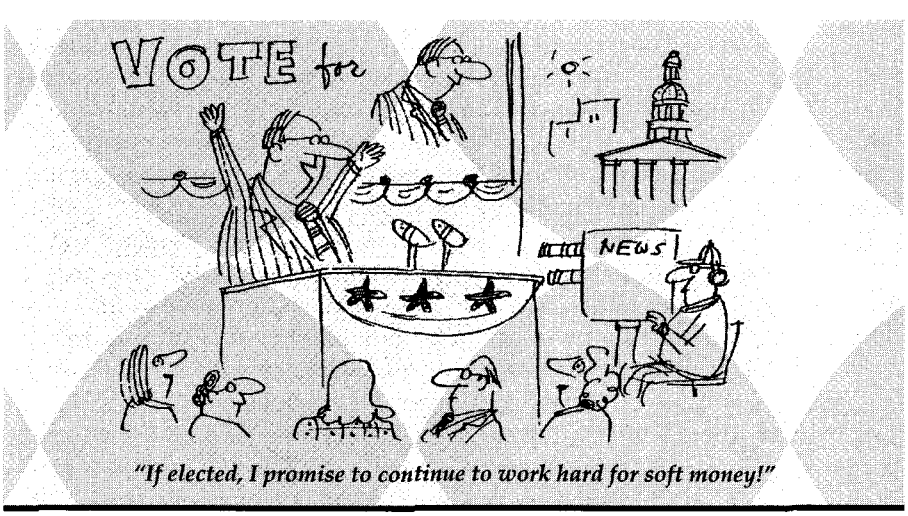
> This we transferred onto a table beneath the C-arm of a Mobile Digital Imaging system, which was an X-ray machine and fluoroscope in one computer-controlled unit....Other than sinus configurations, which are as distinct as fingerprints in every human being, and a single porcelain crown on the right maxillary incisor, we discovered nothing else....

This kind of expert testimony does not advance the plot, and as for evoking the setting, it is a little too specific—it has a defamiliarizing effect, rather than an atmospheric one. Its purpose is to trumpet its own presence, to convince readers that they have penetrated a restricted milieu, where the currency is field-specific knowledge.

Inside-the-mob movies, women's magazine scoops on celebrity beauty tips, Web sites that allow us to witness real-time surgical operations, reality-based TV shows like Fox's "Cops," which plant us inside the patrol car—all these entertainment offerings operate on a similar principle. Even the much ballyhooed Broadway musical *Rent*, whose characters may compliment the brightness of the moon only to be told it's Spike Lee filming down the street, exploits New York-hipster references in order to present a bohemia for Uptown voyeurs. (Puccini's *La Bohème*, on which *Rent* is based, probably did something similar back in 1896.)

Why do we get a *frisson* from eavesdropping on other people's worlds? Do we, on some level, want to compensate for the social boundaries created by our era's gated communities, niche-marketing, multicultural consciousness, and increasing professional specialization? Does infiltrating an inner circle give us a vicarious sense of belonging—a groundedness that real-world communities do not supply in this day and age? By tuning into a show like "West Wing," which emphasizes setting over character, are we voting for nurture rather than nature, asserting the importance of environment in molding personality and behavior?

Or perhaps rubbing shoulders with insiders, *via* popular culture, simply gives us a tantalizing sense of expanded possibilities, just as peering through a window from the street lets one live, for a moment, another person's life. □



"If elected, I promise to continue to work hard for soft money!"

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Critics' choices for Christmas

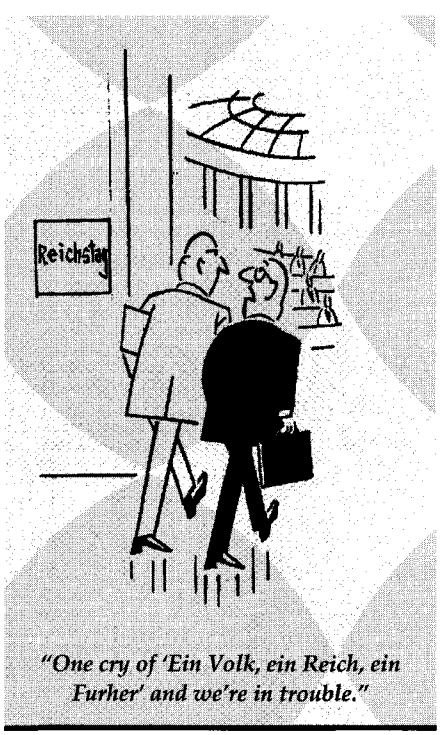
Vivian Segall

Vivian Segall is a writer and editor in Fairfield, Connecticut.

Sometimes there is a perfect book for a perfect place, as I found out a year ago when my husband suggested I take Eric Newby's *Love and War in the Apennines* (Penguin Books, $9.95, 224 pp.) along on our first trip to Europe. We had never been anywhere before, unless you count a comical camping trip through the Pacific rain forest and the Canadian Rockies, during which our outdoor survival equipment consisted of a leaky pup tent, a leaky coffee pot, and a bag of charcoal. Now we were in Italy. When we were not battling waves of tourists with their Gucci bags, trying to reach the next historic marvel, I was in the company of Eric Newby, who had his own first "trip" to Europe as a young officer in the British Navy in 1942. Newby was captured off the coast of Sicily, where his mission had been to paddle ashore, sneak into a German airfield, and try to destroy as many bombers as possible.

Newby became a prisoner of war, and *Love and War in the Apennines* is his account of what happened to him and other POWs after the Italian armistice in 1943 left the Germans in control of Italy. Freed from prison camp, where he had unfortunately broken his foot the day before, he fled to the mountains to hide from the Nazis. Newby, who after the war became a much-admired travel writer (*A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush, Slowly Down the Ganges*) is modest in recounting his months on the run, aided by poor Italian farmers and villagers. Others suffered more, he writes, faced more danger, or risked their lives for him. He is exquisitely aware of how dependent he is on the kindness of those who feed, clothe, and house him, in spite of the *paura*—fear—of being shot for helping a POW.

It's a remarkable story, made more so by the cast of rural characters, some seemingly preserved from the seventeenth century, and by the constant fear of betrayal and capture. (Even better, there is love at first sight, as he meets and is helped by a village girl whom he marries after the war.) He hides buried in a pit, in a cave, in huts, and on a farm, where his job is to dig rocks out of the fields and pitch them over a cliff. At this farm on the Pian del Sotto, where the most comic scenes occur, he fantasizes about returning after the war, his fortune made, and "employing people to fill carts with stones so I can empty them over the cliff." The mother, Signora Agata, relays messages to those in the fields by flinging open a window and hollering in the appropriate direction. Evenings are spent around the fire, discussing London and famous English criminals like Jack the Ripper. The *signora*'s yelled communications reminded me of our own attempts to use Florentine pay phones, which usually ended with one of us shrieking into the receiver, clutching one ear to block the roar of motorbikes, pedestrians, and church bells, never quite able to make out the reply.



"One cry of 'Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Furher' and we're in trouble."

On a day off from harvesting boulders, Newby goes for a walk and is discovered by a German officer carrying a butterfly net. It is Newby's good luck that this officer turns out to be a professor of lepidoptery whose military assignment is to teach German soldiers about the Renaissance. The Italian villagers have mistaken *Oberleutnant* Frick for a fisherman, Newby writes, for none of them has ever heard of hunting butterflies. Thus, when Frick asks "in his painstaking Italian what was the best way to the top of the mountain, they thought he must be a lunatic to want to go fishing on the top of a mountain which was over four thousand feet high."

It was delicious indeed to return from a day viewing the masterpieces of Italian culture, those monuments to genius and wealth, and read Newby. Early on, he is rescued by the Zanoni family and given a dry, warm bed in their cavern-like home—"it was the best bed I ever slept in, before or since"—and counts himself the most fortunate man in Fortress Europe. Another benefactor is the shepherd Abramo, who lives in a hut of wattle and turf, and who wraps the feverish "Enrico" in shirts woven by his great-great-grandmother in the eighteenth century. It is awe-inspiring to be in the presence of six-hundred-year-old masterpieces. It is equally instructive, as our bizarre century ends, to realize that fifty years ago some people in Italy were living in huts,

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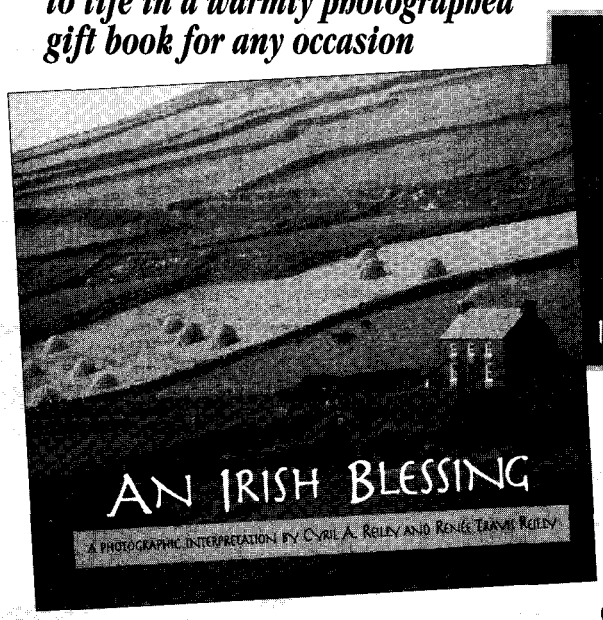

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eating out of hand-hewn wooden bowls, and wearing animal skins.

I immersed myself in another memoir of a young man caught in the trap of World War II, Peter Gay's *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (Yale University Press, $22.50, 208 pp.). Gay, Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale and director of the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library, is the author of many books, including the five-volume *The Bourgeois Experience* as well as a biography of Freud. *My German Question* is his painful analysis of how he coped with growing up under the Nazis, until he and his parents were able to flee to Cuba in 1939, and to the United States in 1941. My parents were also from Berlin, but unlike the Fröhlichs (Gay is the name the family chose as a joyful Americanization), they did not make it out of Germany before the Holocaust. Gay, a scholar of the Enlightenment, aptly calls this book "the story of a poisoning and how I dealt with it."

Gay brings his analyst's eye to his own childhood—he was born in 1923—and is unflinching in portraying himself, his family, and friends. After the war, Gay (along with other German Jews), was subjected to disparagement, "usually laced with self-righteous anger," from those who wondered, ignorantly, why all the Jews in Germany had not simply left the country in 1933, when Hitler came to power. This book is an angry answer to those facile, and infuriating, questions.

Gay is at his best describing his family and their Berlin milieu, and it is here that I found many astonishing similarities to my own family history. He deftly explains the peculiar Berlin sense of humor and love of nonsense, such as this snippet: "Look, I told you, the sausage tastes like soapsuds." Berliners, my parents included, apparently find this hilarious. Both Gay's *Onkle* Siegfried and my grandfather, Albert Segall, were given the Iron Cross for service in the First World War; his father and my grandfather were china and crystal merchants in Berlin; our mothers were skilled seamstresses; Gay and my father both loved chocolate; in fact, my grandmother would often serve a giant choco-

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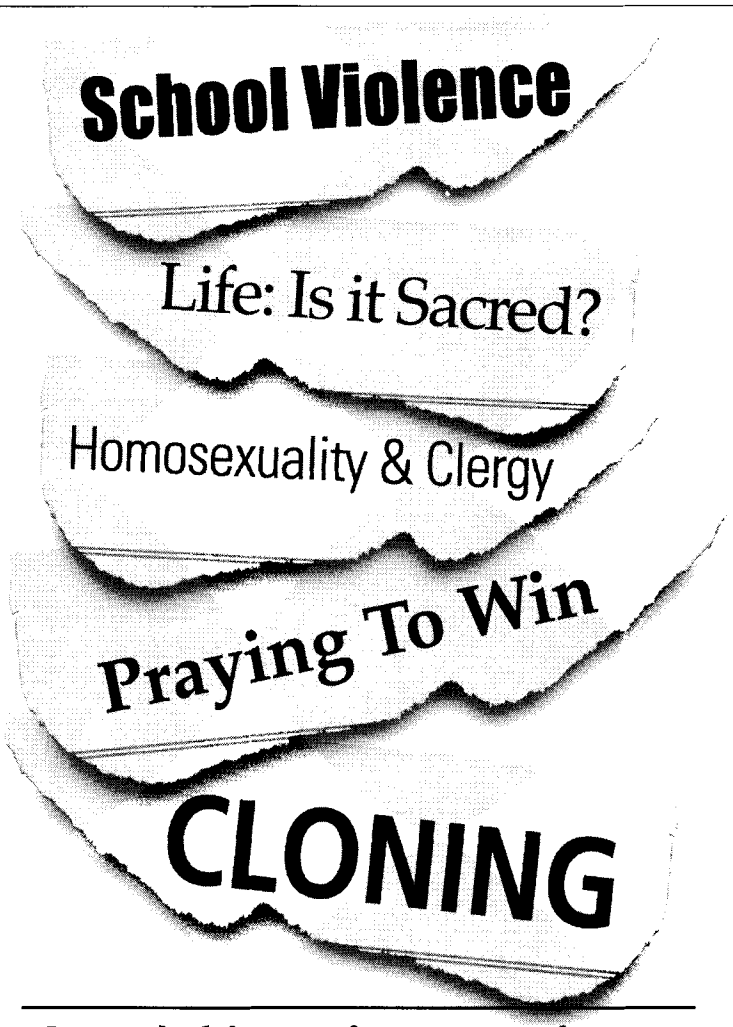
late bar to her son and husband instead of dinner! "Chocolate pudding, with vanilla sauce, of course, was my mother's department," Gay writes, an expression I can hear coming from my own father.

As part of what he calls his survival strategies for coping with the savage "whirlwind of hate and contempt" that Jews were living under, Gay became an ardent soccer fan (ditto my own father). He and his father also developed a passion for collecting stamps—as did my father. Brilliantly, his father hides valuable stamps under photos in a book about the Nazis, and successfully sends the stamps undetected to relatives overseas. Going over his German travail was painful, and his prose at times seems tense and too careful. But at other times, his imagery is piercing: "Berlin seemed far away, but that was an illusion; for years I would pick fragments of it from my skin as though I had wallowed among shards of broken glass."

Half Magic (Harcourt Brace, $6, 192 pp.) is a reissue of Edward Eager's classic children's story of magic and mayhem. It is the first of a seven-volume series written in 1954. I first learned of the book when *Commonweal*'s children's book reviewer, Daria Donnelly, recommended it. The mayhem begins when four children find a magic charm on the sidewalk and discover it will make any wish come true—but only half of it. Wishing the cat could talk results in a feline who can indeed speak, but only gobbledygook. Wishing they were all on a desert island lands the four children in a desert instead. The results are often hilarious as the children must remember not to make idle wishes and to phrase their wishes as doubles of what they want.

Half Magic is suitable for all ages. I read it happily, as did my my fifteen-year-old son, my thirteen-year-old daughter, and my seven-year-old daughter. My forty-eight-year-old husband, who seems to spend all his time reading George Weigel's *Witness to Hope*, has only read half of *Half Magic*. Sarah (the thirteen-year-old) pointed out that he must have wished he'd read it all.



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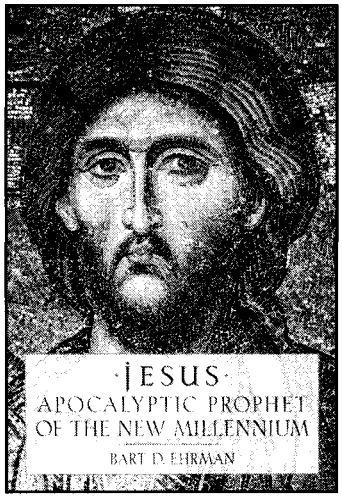

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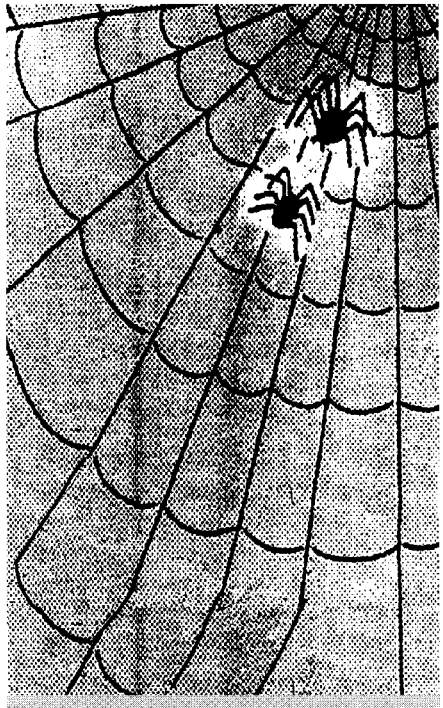
William Pritchard

William Pritchard is the Henry Clay Folger professor of English at Amherst College. He is the author of Playing It by Ear: Literary Essays and Reviews *(University of Massachusetts), among other works.*

A. N. Wilson, England's busiest literary man (novelist, biographer, journalist), has followed his highly entertaining novel of last year, *Dream Children*, with *God's Funeral* (W.W. Norton, $25, 385 pp.), a breezy, highly readable excursion through what various literary and philosophical figures, mostly from nineteenth-century England, had to say about "the God-question." Wilson admits he is neither a theologian, philospher, nor scientist, but as a man of letters he has no hesitation in taking them on—from Kant to Darwin, Bentham to Baron von Hügel. Wilson's presentation is old-fashioned: a portrait of the man (or woman); liberal use of memorable anecdotes about him; extracts from his writings showing attitudes toward God, religion, the church, science; then a personal, undispassion-



"I find that eating one's mate avoids all the unpleasantness of writing a book."

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ate judgment on the critic's part of his subject's contribution and importance. He describes William James's style as "an intelligible, even a chatty [one], laced with amusing asides and jokes," and there is no better description of Wilson's own style, one calculated to annoy—as indeed it has—as much as amuse readers. I found him very good on Newman, Swinburne, even "funny old Herbert Spencer"; less good on writers I admire much more than he does, like Matthew Arnold and Bernard Shaw. Wilson's intemperate judgments contribute to his charm, as they do with Ruskin, on whom he has some vivid pages. What he says about Ruskin applies to himself: "You never quite know which way he will jump."

Sue Miller's fifth novel, *While I Was Gone* (Alfred A. Knopf, $24. 266 pp.), was respectfully enough received when published earlier this year, yet I don't think this remarkable writer has yet been given her full accord of praise. Her first novel, 1986's *The Good Mother*, about a recently separated woman and her three-year-old daughter, was a critical success; its first sentence—"The post office in East Shelton reminded me of the one in the little town near my grandparents' summer home in Maine"—set the note of patient, unfancy, locally rooted narration that has been Miller's trademark in the novels that followed: *Family Pictures* (1990), *For Love* (1993), and *The Distinguished Guest* (1995). Miller's particular strength is felt through what Lionel Trilling, writing about *The Great Gatsby*, referred to as "the poet's voice," which "either gives us confidence in what is being said or...tells us we do not need to listen," and that carries "the modulation and the living form of what is being said."

In *While I Was Gone*, the voice is that of a woman, Jo Becker, a veterinarian married to a minister, Daniel, mother of three grown children, living in one of those New England towns—"Adams Mills, the Adamses long dead, the mills long burned down." The novel begins in silence, with Jo and her husband fishing together on holiday break. This is the day before "everything began," when Jo's past, particularly her past life in 1968 Cambridge, Massachusetts, takes over her present. The arrival of a key figure from the past into the carefully settled life of Jo and her husband is the catalyst for a complicated sequence of events that precipitates a new and poisonous silence between husband and wife. Characters, place, story, are all treated with Miller's accustomed ease and thoroughness, but always through the totally convincing music of a meditative speaking voice, equally responsive to "life," whether it's the life of love, dealing nervously with sensitive children, ice skating, driving a car, or presiding over a family Thanksgiving. There are no great ideas to take away from the novel, in part testimony to her preference for the complex over the simple, her commitment to rendering the weave and texture—above all, the tonality—of the everyday. She has never written better.

The same may also be said about Mary Jo Salter, whose fourth book of poems, *A Kiss in Space* (Alfred A. Knopf,

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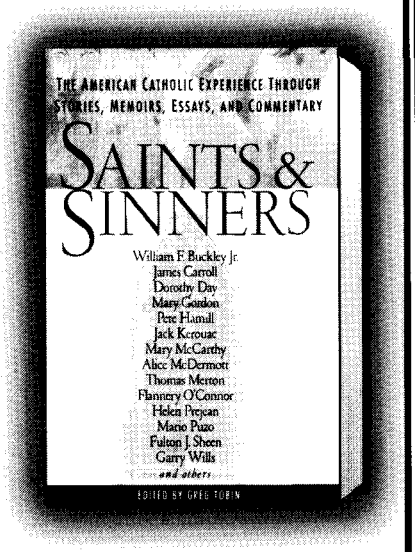
A personal portrait of Catholic America



Featuring devotees and dissenters alike, *Saints and Sinners* offers diverse and often poignant views on the Catholic American experience from such influential writers as:

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Dorothy Day
Mary Gordon
Pete Hamill
Jack Kerouac
Mary McCarthy
Alice McDermott
Thomas Merton
Flannery O'Connor
Helen Prejean
Mario Puzo
Fulton J. Sheen
Garry Wills
and others

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$22, 96 pp.), is a valuable extension of the combination of writerly craft and human expressiveness evident in her earlier books. Salter is often typed as a New Formalist, and she can do rhyme and stanza with the best of them; but there's nothing pedantic or timid in her procedures. Although she's unrepentantly domestic—inasmuch as she writes poems about her parents, her husband and children, the interior space often figured by one house or another—it's with the sense that these are fragile elements of experience, which begin to disappear even as they are touched. In "A Leak Somewhere" she watches, with her spouse and children, the old *Titanic* movie on TV (Barbara Stanwyck, Clifton Webb) and after the kids go to bed the couple sense that in their own house "a fine / crack—nothing spectacular, / only a leak somewhere—is slowly / widening to claim each of us / in random order...." It's a strength of statement that fends off bathos. Salter's variety shows up in choice of subjects: a longish poem, in three parts, "Alternating Current," involving Helen Keller, Sherlock Holmes, and other historical figures; a very funny one about an *au pair*'s bewilderment at her American employers (the girl thinks of her father's bakery in the Alps "whenever they pass her a slice of their so-called bread"); a poem about going up in a balloon outside Paris ("Fire-Breathing Dragon"); and a lovely elegy for Louis MacNeice ("Sound Effects"). She has written well previously about her mother, and in this volume "Home Movies" ends touchingly with the mother's "stoneware mixing bowl"

> figured with hand-holding dancers
> handed down so many years
> ago to my own kitchen, still
> valueless, unbroken. Here
> she's happy, teaching us to dye
> some Easter eggs in it, a Grecian
> urn of sorts near which—a foster
> child of silence and slow time
> myself—I smile because she does,
> and patiently await my turn.

These are poems in which tenderness is inwoven with humor, and where impressive technical ability exists at the service of imaginative sanity.

If you care about American jazz, you can't afford to miss Richard Sudhalter's massive *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contributions to Jazz, 1915–45* (Oxford, $35, 1,072 pp.). Sudhalter, a trumpet player and biographer of Bix Beiderbecke, devotes hundreds of pages to an exploration of the most distinctive (and often undervalued) white musicians of the New Orleans and Swing era. His musicological skills are formidable, but with some ability to read music one can rewardingly follow (it helps to hear the record) his illustrated analyses of solos and soloists. Of particular interest to me were his chapters on Beiderbecke, and on Jack Teagarden and Pee Wee Russell, on the Artie Shaw band of the late thirties and early forties. Sudhalter brings his people and their music wonderfully alive through a combination of anecdote, historical placing, and—above all—the gifted descriptions of how the music sounds.

Finally, there is Evelyn Waugh's *The Complete Short Stories* (Little Brown, $29.95, 536 pp.), which includes forty or so items collected for the first time. A number of them pass through the mind pretty quickly, but you never know when you'll hit paydirt, as I did with "Excursion in Reality," about a struggling young writer, Simon Lent, employed to make a movie of *Hamlet* from what the eccentric producer, Sir James Macrae, calls "an entirely new angle." "That's why I've called in Mr. Lent, I want him to write dialogue for us," he tells the assembled. "But, surely," said Simon, "there's a lot of dialogue there already?" Good point, but not the producer's, who wants a Shakespeare in modern speech since the original is so difficult to understand. Things don't work out, and, after many drastic improvements on the original, Sir James announces "No, it won't do. We must scrap the whole thing. We've got much too far from the original story. I can't think why you need introduce Julius Caesar and King Arthur at all." (They were, of course, suggested by him at the last conference.) The short story wasn't Waugh's ideal literary form, but there are enough golden moments in these to make you forget such a reservation.

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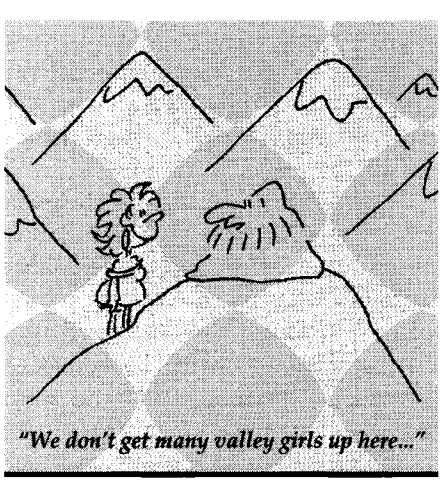
Robin Antepara

Robin Antepara is a free-lance writer currently living in Japan.

In the past ten years, a number of remarkable books by Chinese women have been published to international acclaim: Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai*, and Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* are two that come to mind.

Despite the seismic changes that have rocked Japan in the past fifty years, no stories of such archetypal power have emerged from the pens of Japanese women. What we have instead is a growing body of work by Westerners (mostly men) writing about Japan. Many of these books—memoirs by backpackers finding themselves in Tokyo's neon canyons, academics proselytizing for and against Japan's new economic religion—are easily forgotten. Several that have come out in the past year or two, however, are not so easy to put aside.

Arthur Golden's novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Vintage, $14, 434 pp.), is one. Given the dearth of books by Japanese women, it's a little ironic that a Western man has created such a thoroughly believable portrait of a Japanese female. Written in the first person, the book tells the story of Sayuri: how she was snatched out of a fishing village and sold to a geisha house in Kyoto when she was only ten, and of her metamorphosis from ragtag child to refined and accomplished lady.



"We don't get many valley girls up here..."

Perhaps part of the appeal of this best-selling novel is how its aura of intimacy contrasts with the opaque image Japan generally has for Westerners, who otherwise find it difficult to penetrate the mysteries of a Noh mask, let alone the granite façade of Japan Inc. Golden slowly reveals the strains of passion and animosity that broil beneath the surface of polite geisha society, breathing life into Sayuri with every turn of the page. The only way he's able to pull off this extraordinary act of impersonation is by telling the story through the Westernized voice of this aging geisha as she works on her memoirs in New York City—a device that also helps to create a bridge to the more exotic aspects of the story.

Another author who creates an almost palpable feeling of intimacy is David Chadwick in his biography: *Crooked Cucumber—The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki* (Broadway, $26, 432 pp.). Suzuki, best known as the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (he is unrelated to the famous D.T.), was largely un-

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known inside his native Japan. He labored silently at a country temple until, at age fifty-five, he was able to fulfill a lifelong dream and go to America. By the time of his death in 1971, he had built a nationally recognized Zen Center and started America's first Zen Buddhist monastery.

That Suzuki was loved and revered by his American students is abundantly clear. But Chadwick, who studied with Suzuki in the late 1960s, does not stop at this. He digs into Suzuki's past and probes his shadow side, examining how Suzuki, a rather staid and duty-bound priest, was humanized by a family tragedy that he himself helped bring about. Chadwick's great accomplishment is that, by story's end, we love Suzuki just as much for his faults as for his talent for conveying Buddhist teachings to his American students.

Like Chadwick and Golden, John Dower, a professor of history at M.I.T., also has a passion for exploring the modern Japanese psyche. His latest book, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (W.W. Norton, $29.95, 676 pp.), is a sweeping, almost epic, look at Japan in the years after the war. Since more than six of those years involved the intense presence of American troops, much of the book is taken up with a less-than-flattering portrayal of the occupation as well.

However, it is the Japanese experience that most concerns Dower. Indeed, the M.I.T. historian has made a career of seeing things from the side of the vanquished, and *Embracing Defeat* is no exception. He relentlessly delves into racist stereotypes of Japan, chastising those who would seek to place the Japanese into neat categories. However, unlike a number of other academics who write of a Japan that can do no wrong, Dower can be equally tough on the Japanese, lambasting homilies on Japanese uniqueness and harmony. *Embracing Defeat* is a book that is as entertaining as it is penetrating, as provocative as it is fair-minded. For anyone interested in a closer look at the world's second largest economy and the often opaque culture in which it flourishes, any of these three books is not a bad place to start.

Cullen Murphy

Cullen Murphy is the managing editor of the Atlantic Monthly. *His most recent book is* The Word According to Eve: Women and the Bible in Ancient Times and Our Own *(Houghton Mifflin).*

The famous complaint of the free-lance writer is that he's so busy writing, he doesn't have any time for his "writing." As a magazine editor, I have a parallel complaint: I'm often so busy reading that I don't have any time for "reading"—reading for pure pleasure, that is. Somehow, unexpectedly, these past few autumn months have brought an eclectic handful of books to hand, and provided a few stray days to enjoy them.

Out of the blue one morning came a note from an *Atlantic Monthly* reader recommending Larry Baker's *The Flamingo Rising* (Alfred A. Knopf, $24, 309 pp.) as "the most under-recognized book of 1997." Months went by, and then also out of the blue came a British paperback copy of the book, sent by the author. The double coverage was unnerving, so I gave in, and ended up reading through the night. The mise en scène is preposterous: The plot involves a complex feud between the outlandish family that owns The Flamingo, a drive-in movie theater on the Florida coast, and the more straitlaced family that owns the funeral home across the street. (Typical issue: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* comes to town.) But the picaresque exuberance is grounded in deftly wrought characters and a narrative that possesses a profoundly moral core. I closed *The Flamingo Rising* with a sense both of satisfaction and gratitude, and bewilderment about what to read next.

As I placed *The Flamingo Rising* on the shelf at home reserved for an idiosyncratic "private stock" of books, I noticed a slim, hardbound volume that had been sitting there for years, and decided to reread it: John McPhee's *A Sense of Where You Are* (reissued in paperback by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $12, 226 pp.), his 1965 profile of Bill Bradley, then still a student at Princeton and the dominant figure in college basketball. Originally a *New Yorker* profile, the book consumes no more than a couple of hours; one reason to read it is for an early sample of McPhee's clean, crystalline style. But, of course, the subject isn't McPhee. From the vantage point of the mid-1960s, Bill Bradley's classmates seem to take it for granted that Bradley will become president, or at the very least governor of Missouri. The title of the book refers to Bradley's finely calibrated instinct for the spatial geometry of basketball. McPhee describes watching Bradley practice on an unfamiliar court—at the Lawrenceville School—and seeing him miss one practice shot after another. "You want to know something?" Bradley says finally. "That basket is about an inch-and-a-half too low." McPhee goes on: "Some weeks later, I went back to Lawrenceville with a steel tape, borrowed a stepladder, and measured the height of the basket. It was nine feet ten and seven-eighths inches above the floor, or one and one-eighth inches too low."

A few days ago I finished Garry Wills's short study, *Saint Augustine* (Lipper/Viking, $19.95, 152 pp.). The book is one in a series of brief Penguin Lives, edited by James Atlas, the idea being that the full Leon Edel treatment shouldn't be the only extant biographical model. (Some other projected Penguin Lives: Edna O'Brien on James Joyce; Roy Blount, Jr. on Robert E. Lee; Bobbie Ann Mason on Elvis Presley.) Wills has written a crisp narrative essay on Augustine—as you'd expect, more an intellectual portrait than a *curriculum vitae*. He is at great pains to revise the popular view of Augustine as "an ex-debauchee obsessed with sex" and to emphasize the dynamic character of Augustine's thought.

Wills's range (during the past year I've read long pieces by him on Lincoln's rhetoric; the *Starr Report*; the Sundance Film Festival; and the new Venetian opera house) and his stamina remain a source of astonishment. He produces a new book at least once a year, and something brilliant for the *New York Review of Books* at least once a month, and then

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seems to turn up every few days in various other venues. One passage from Wills on Augustine inevitably brings Wills himself to mind: "Augustine dictated to relays of stenographers, often late into the night. He employed teams of copyists. His sermons, several a week, were taken down by his own or others' shorthand writers. In some seasons, he preached daily. His letters were sent off in many copies. He paced about as he dictated, a reflection of the mental restlessness and energy conveyed in the very rhythms of his prose."

How, one wonders, did Augustine ever find time to read? How, for that matter, does Garry Wills?

Finally, I would like to second a book recommended by William Pritchard. A.N. Wilson had the good fortune to publish *God's Funeral* (W.W. Norton, $25, 385 pp.) just as the state of Kansas was preparing to raise new hurdles against the teaching of evolution in public schools. The debates over belief and its implications as our own century draws to a close sharply echo the nineteenth-century debates that Wilson chronicles in this collection of mini-profiles (of Carlyle, Mill, Darwin, Arnold, Hardy, Eliot, William James, and the Modernists, among others). Strip the story down and there's nothing new here—the nineteenth-century contest between religion and reason is by now a musty scrim on the stage of civilization—but Wilson is a deft miniaturist, capturing some of the emotional character that has long since drained out of familiar arguments and personalities. Wilson's own journey from Anglicanism to agnosticism—not mentioned in this book, though Wilson has written about it elsewhere—adds a further layer of resonance.

One memorable story: John Stuart Mill, after borrowing the only manuscript copy of Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution*, calls on Carlyle later to confess that the whole thing had accidentally been burned. "Oh, that I had faith!" Carlyle wrote in his diary that night. "Oh, that I had! Then there were nothing too hard or heavy for me." He went to work, and wrote the volume again.

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Carol DeChant
a native Iowan, has been published in many magazines and newspapers including Books and Culture, Cosmopolitan, and the Chicago Tribune. DeChant explains, "These pages will encourage you to see that the stories you harbor in attics, scrapbooks, and memory are no less sacred than the ones in your Bible."

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Sally Cunneen

Sally Cunneen, professor emeritus at Rockland Community College, is author of In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol *(Ballantine).*

Two personal cross-cultural explorations have helped widen the meaning of women's struggles today for me. Elizabeth Fernea's *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (Doubleday, $14, 448 pp.) gives readers access to the lives and views of a diverse set of Muslim women in middle eastern countries from Iraq, Morocco, and Egypt to Saudi Arabia and Palestine/Israel. Fernea knows them well, having lived and raised her children among them. She has also written books and made award-winning documentary films about Arab women, and now returns as a grandmother to see how they are coping at a time of rising commitment to Islam. Including enough context to show how history affects each country differently and how class as well as religion shapes the responses of the women she meets, Fernea finds a powerful commitment on their part to help other women educationally and economically. Most distinguish between repressive realities and the Islamic ideal for which they struggle, and have devised winning strategies for pursuing women's equality within their patriarchal societies. This relaxed, inside look at Muslim households and public life from a trained, sympathetic observer opens a window on a world few Americans get a chance to see.

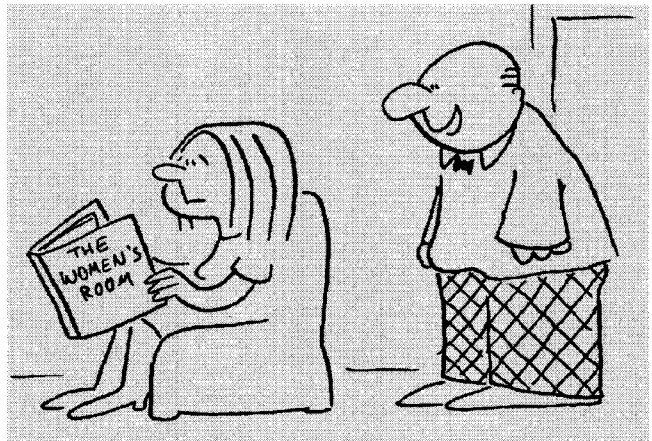
The mythic potential and the social reality of women's existence is beautifully entwined in China Galland's spiritual search for the feminine divine in *The Bond Between Women: A Journey to Fierce Compassion* (Riverhead, $14, 344 pp.). The author takes us to crowded festivals in Nepal, Calcutta, and Rio, celebrating both compassionate goddesses and the Black Madonna, whose tales she intersperses with visits to their shrines. Drawn almost against her will into the sufferings of those around her, she begins to include portraits of real women helping the poorest of the poor in each place she visits. "The divine feminine," she realizes, "needs our hands, our eyes, our hearts too!" Galland's story is original and moving, written with the skill of a good novelist.

Shusaku Endo was one of the very few novelists in the latter part of our century to create works that effectively communicated an encounter with the sacred. Rereading his last novel, *Deep River* (New Directions, $19.95, 216 pp.), I was impressed by the convincing way he exposes the spiritual aridity of secular, consumer culture while observing a group of Japanese tourists on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of India.

Despite the diverse attitudes to faith of his four chief characters who come together at the holy river Ganges, each somehow finds enough insight to overcome despair and loneliness. Isobe, unable to find the dead wife who asked him to look for her, discovers with increasing pain how little he paid attention to her in life and how deeply he misses her. Kaguchi, bathing in the Ganges, is able to shed the terror and guilt of wartime cannibalism. Numada, recovering from a critical illness, releases a myna bird in an Indian bird sanctuary as reparation to the dead bird that had been his closest companion in the hospital. Mitsuko, whose story is the most complex, follows Otsu, a seemingly failed priest she both despises and unconsciously admires, to his pathetic death while carrying the dying poor of Varanasi to the cremation grounds. The tension in this relationship is the center of Endo's novel; he does not prettify either the clownlike, innocent Otsu or the intelligent, cynical Matsuko. Though she, too, immerses herself in the holy river that seems deep enough to embrace the sorrows of humanity, she still resists Otsu's God. She has been moved only by the goddess Chamunda, who lives in graveyards and offers her withered breasts to the children who line up before her. In his poignant final novel, Endo projects a distinctively Japanese Christianity, merging his Catholicism with the beliefs of other world religions without turning a complex novel into a homily.

Anyone who likes family stories told with insight and artistry should find Carol DeChant's joyous, well-researched memoir a rare treat. Recreating the crises, relationships, and accidents of her Midwestern relatives in *Momma's Enchanted Supper...and other stories for the long evenings of Advent* (Loyola University Press, $17.95, 240 pp.), the author evokes periods and events in recent American history that pull the reader into the text. The lives of these aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents are touched by Nikita Khruschev, John F. Kennedy, Babe Zaharias, and Chicago mobsters. Who can forget Momma's words of wisdom: "The reason nuns have no wrinkles is that they have no children."

Though the tone is deeply comic, the narrator and characters carry on a running dialogue with biblical texts, questioning them, and squeezing meaning out of them. DeChant's greatest achievement is to show that life gives meaning to the text, not the reverse. Daily life is beautifully rendered here, complete with hats, shoes, menus, and dances, as well as the inevitable illnesses and death. These stories are a revelation.



"You're awfully quiet, Sweetie-pie. What's going on in that little head of yours?"

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Jon Nilson

Jon Nilson is associate professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago. He specializes in ecumenical theology and contemporary Catholicism.

When I told a friend that I had been assigned to write Christmas book recommendations for *Commonweal*, he said, "That's good. After all, your reading is pretty eclectic." Eclectic! That does sound better than "slipshod and undisciplined." But you be the judge.

When my week's schedule is too tight for a novel, I often turn to a short story by William Trevor. I never feel short-changed. "Of the Cloth" (*New Yorker*, March 9, 1998) first introduced Trevor to me. In this story about the meeting of two men, the older a priest of the Church of Ireland, the younger a Roman Catholic priest, Trevor unfolds the pathos of their ministry in a newly secularized land and the plight of their churches in the twilight of Christendom.

Now I keep Trevor's *The Collected Stories* (Penguin Books, $19.95, 1,261 pp.), eighty-five in all, near my reading lamp. At just over twenty cents apiece, this must be one of the best retail bargains in fiction. There are few dramatic events in Trevor's fiction; instead, just ordinary people making their way through their ordinary lives. Yet Trevor incises them permanently in our imagination and memory.

Mark Chaves's *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Harvard University Press, $16.95, 249 pp.) brings a sociological perspective to that much-debated question. Chaves had a hunch that a particular church's policy on ordination was driven more by external pressures than by internal principles, doctrinal or theological. In the debates within American denominations over the last hundred years, Chaves found that a church's desire to maintain a certain stance *vis-à-vis* the "world" often weighed more than its doctrine. A church's position is, among other things, a statement of its identity. Denying ordination to

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Qualifications include five or more years' experience in healthcare and a graduate degree in theology, ethics, education, healthcare administration, or organization development. The selected candidate must have knowledge of and ability to apply theology and ethics to advance the healthcare ministry throughout the organization as well as superior facilitation, organization, communication, people management and customer service orientation skills. Travel will be required as well as relocation to St. Louis, Missouri.

SMHS offers a competitive salary, benefits and relocation package. Please send a cover letter, resume, and your salary requirements to our corporate office at: Sisters of Mercy Health System; Attention: Human Resources/BA; P.O. Box 31902; St. Louis, MO 63131-0902; Fax: 314/965-9182; E-mail: jobs@corp.smhs.com.

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women is a declaration: "This church will not take its marching orders from modernity and its notions of equality."

Thus, Chaves helps Roman Catholics grasp the broader parameters of the debate. Here is yet another arena, it seems, where the meaning and future of that "conversation" with the world, which Vatican II promised and undertook more than thirty years ago, are still contested.

Susan A. Ross's office is only two doors away from mine here at Loyola. So it was friendship, not curiosity or interest, that led me to her *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (Continuum, $24.95, 224 pp.). However, I was soon caught up in her accounts of the pain, confusion, and struggles of ordinary Christians, male and female, and in her claim that the hopes of these "ordinary" Christians constitute a demand for renewal in our sacramental theology and practice.

Ross's feminist perspective is not bounded by the issue of ordaining women and the injustices of patriarchy, crucial as these controversies are. Instead, it reaches out to uncover the poverty and distortions of our traditional sacramental theology. Ross invites us to imagine new possibilities for communal worship that would open us more fully to God's "extravagant affections." If other sacramental theologians pursue her suggestions, we may yet feast on the full banquet of the liturgy. We've survived for too long on saltines and tap water.

Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War (Vintage Books, $14, 406 pp.) really began on the morning Tony Horwitz woke up to the sound of musket fire and the sight of "Confederates" sprawled in the yard of his Virginia home. Over coffee (in tin cups, of course) he met some Civil War "reenactors." This encounter energized his fascination with what some call the "War Between the States" and others the "War of Northern Aggression." The meeting sent him on a journey into worlds where that war is not quite over.

In the realm described by Horwitz the Confederacy's symbols are still prevalent, though very plastic. The Confederate flag can be anything from a truck ornament to an icon of resistance to Big Brother in Washington, D.C. The war's personal legacies are still powerful, too. The notion that we Americans are not like other nations, burdened by blood-soaked memories, is a Yankee delusion. Yet Horwitz is not a somber companion, but a thoughtful, generous, and funny one. Along his way he met folks that he won't soon forget. Neither will you.

Reynolds Price's *Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* (Scribner, $20, 112 pp.) was prompted by a letter to Price from a medical student fighting a virulent, terminal cancer. Jim Fox had read Price's own account of his struggle with the disease and so he wrote to ask the questions that are the book's subtitle. In crafting his response, Price draws on many sources. At the center of his thinking, however, stands the crucified Jesus, whose faith in Abba points to a mode of divine fatherhood that far transcends our childish hopes and expectations of fathers.

To Price, a lean and precise prose is warrant for the truthfulness of its claims. His own spare, honest, and courageous language is certainly compelling. Every word has been refined in the fire of his own suffering and doubts. The result is a text that shows God's reply to Job to be satisfactory and displays Dante's wisdom: "In His will is our peace." Having fully faced suffering's horrible darkness, Price gives us the light we need to get through our trials more faithfully. □

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SAINT MARY'S UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA announces a one-year renewable position as **Assistant Professor of Moral Theology** to begin August 15, 2000. Doctorate and evidence of successful teaching preferred. Thorough appreciation of Roman Catholic theological and magisterial traditions and practices, and demonstrated competence in liberal arts are required. In addition to teaching four undergraduate courses per semester (12 hours, 2–3 preparations) in theology, ministry, and the liberal arts, opportunities exist in Saint Mary's *Institute for Pastoral Ministries* that awards the M.A. in Pastoral Ministries. Applications will be reviewed beginning January 3, 2000 until a suitable candidate is found. Send a letter of interest, *curriculum vitae*, graduate transcripts, and three letters of professional recommendation to: Robert Smith, F.S.C., Ph.D., Saint Mary's University, 700 Terrace Heights #46, Winona MN 55987-1399. AA/EOE. *www.smumn.edu*

Theology Professor

TRINITY COLLEGE, IN WASHINGTON, D.C., announces a tenure track position in the Theology Program for a religion scholar with a strong interdisciplinary background and familiarity with the Catholic tradition to teach undergraduate courses such as "Religion and Culture," "Religion and Politics," "African-American Religion Experience," "Religion and Sciences," and "Religion and the Media." Doctorate required, ABD candidates will be considered. To apply, please send a letter of interest, *curriculum vitae*, and contact information for three professional references by February 1, 2000 to Trinity College, Carole King, Director of Human Resources, Trinity College, 125 Michigan Ave. NE, Washington, DC 20017 Fax: 202-884-9123; email: humanresources@trinitydc.edu. Trinity College is an EEO employer and welcomes applications from women and minorities.

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GOING FORTH

Michael Kirwan

Michael Kirwan died of cancer on November 12. He was fifty-four. For over twenty years, he lived with the poor in Washington, D.C., founding two Catholic Worker houses in the inner city and a farm in West Virginia. A life-long reader of Commonweal, *on September 8 he sent the following letter—here abridged—to friends and benefactors.*

Last Tuesday, my doctor at Providence Hospital told me the cancer within my lung had spread. It is now in my brain, colon, liver, elbow, foot, hip, and leg. There is not much to be done except to pray. The doctor said it would take a miracle to put me well again. Otherwise, I can expect to live from one to six months—shorter rather than longer—since the cancer has become very aggressive.

I don't pray for a miracle. Rather, I pray that I will do whatever God has in store for me. I pray for the women and men of my family who are deeply grieved, and I am especially praying for the people of our farm and houses on the streets, where there is much fear and anxiety over the ceasing of a long and caring association. I know that it will not cease but rather be changed. As my work ebbs, other work commences.

We cannot by ourselves lift the burden of racism, economic and social disparity, suspicion and mistrust; but we can begin to lighten it. Our responses are always an attempt: a small mustard seed of faith to grow, to nurture, to plant again that others might sow and reap. Our response to the gospel is different in all of our lives. Whatever leads to God must be counted as valid.

My own journey began with my parents and their attraction to a gospel that called for personalism, the intimacy of faith in action that was exemplified in the lives of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. That continues. Again and again, over these years, men and women who came into my life seeking hospitality stayed on to provide it. Groups of young people who were briefly touched by the experience of living among the poor came back again. So the work moves from one generation to another. We will never know completely where our influence has touched, but God has worked with the few loaves and a couple of fish and done the rest.

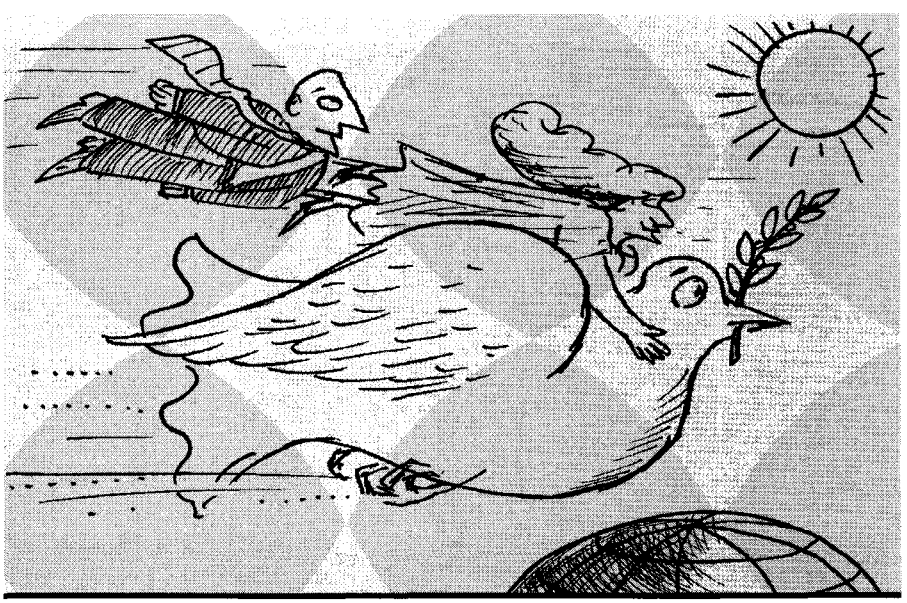
I do not fear death. I fear not being a good and faithful friend and of not being filled with gratitude and joy to a good and gracious God who has so favored me with grace in my unworthiness. God has chosen someone weak and strengthened him. I have seen it in my own life countless times, and in the lives of so many who came across my path.

I think and pray now with all of you and ask that you always remember me as someone who tried to do the best he could and, on not-so-good days, tried to do better. I always tried to break down barriers and build friendships and peace; I trusted that God would see things to completion in good time. I still believe that with all my heart and soul. God will provide, especially now.

I might add that I have not thrown in the towel. For the moment, I am able to manage fairly well and rejoice in the normal operation of the houses. Our work goes on as always. One of the men in our house on T Street went out last night to the parks instead of me, with water, clothes, blankets, toilet articles, and meal tickets. Today our soup line opened and people came in to take showers and use the phone. Hospitality continues. Love goes on. I may not be able to write you again, but my family will be ever vigilant and let all of you know what is happening.

To you, our friends and generous benefactors, I want to especially express my heartfelt gratitude for your faithful trust and prayers. Some have told me that I am the "glue" that holds these houses and this work together. But God is the real unifying force and God will see to it that these places and this work continue, perhaps in a somewhat changed form. For now, let us rejoice and be glad. Emmanuel, the Lord is with us! Love, prayers, and gratitude.

MICHAEL KIRWAN.



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Books to Make the Season Bright

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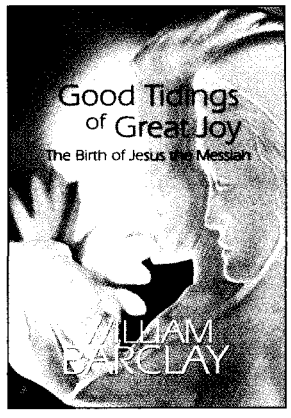

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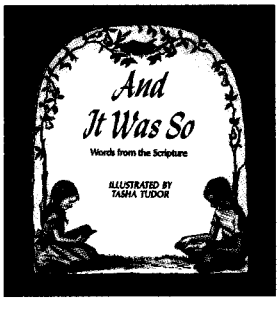

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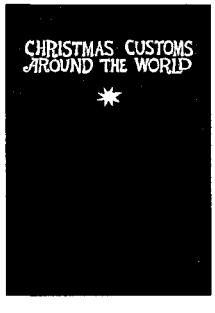

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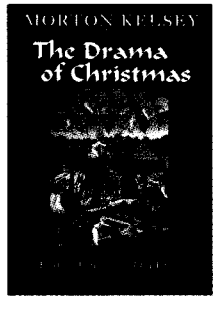

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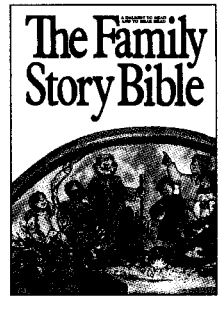

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